

INFERNO!

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A. Smith



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Tales of Fantasy & Adventure

INFERNO!

AS YOU'RE NO doubt already aware if you read last issue's editorial there's a new lunatic in charge of the asylum here at *Inferno!* If you didn't catch Marc's final editorial then I suppose I'd better introduce myself: my name's Christian, I'm a Capricorn and my biggest turn-offs are red sports cars and people who leave chewing gum on bus seats.

Seriously though, I'm really excited about the opportunity I have here at the helm and although there's not any radical changes on the horizon expect to see some exciting new developments within these pages.

Because of the overwhelming success of the all-Gaunt's Ghosts issue earlier this year you can expect to see another themed issue early in 2003, this time based around a couple of popular Warhammer fantasy characters. Hmmm, I think I just gave the game away there.

You'll also be seeing a lot more stories spinning-off from our novels range to go alongside the fantastic Eisenhorn, Kage and Uriel Ventriss stories from recent issues. And this very issue introduces us to characters from James Wallis's forthcoming fantasy extravaganza

The Mark of Damnation while Graham McNeill is currently finishing off a prologue tale to his *Night-bringer* sequel, *Warriors of Ultramar*.

MARC'S NOT gone far though. He's still around hiding in one of the many dark corners of the Black Library, ready to strike at a moment's notice and whisk away writers to work on our aforementioned best-selling novels range. Which of course means that one of my main tasks in my newly elevated role is find even more new blood (for the Blood God?) to strengthen our already impressive roster of talented writers and artists.

I don't think I'm off to a bad start either as this issue's lead story is by Si Spurrier, a name already familiar to *Warhammer Monthly* readers after his Ten-Tailed Cat debut in those hallowed pages. The story he's penned for us here is the first in an irregular series of Doom Eagles tales from a crack team of up and coming *Inferno!* writers.

Thanks to the magic of the information super-highway, writers from opposite corners of the globe have been able to put their heads

together to flesh out the chapter's background on which they can base their fiction. As you'll find out for yourselves the Doom Eagles are unlike any chapter you've read about before and have a very unique outlook on life and their place in the universe. Look out for further Doom Eagles stories and a whole clutch of new talent in the forthcoming months.

But don't think that your established favourites are going to be disappearing from *Inferno!* any time soon. In between writing their novels, people like Dan Abnett, C.L Werner, Gav Thorpe and all our other regular contributors will be putting in an appearance and you never know, a couple of people who haven't graced these pages in a while might make a comeback.

And that's about it from my first editorial. Remember, you can get in touch with us via any of the methods below if you want to tell us about anything you particularly love or hate about *Inferno!*

See you next time.



Christian Dunn
Editor

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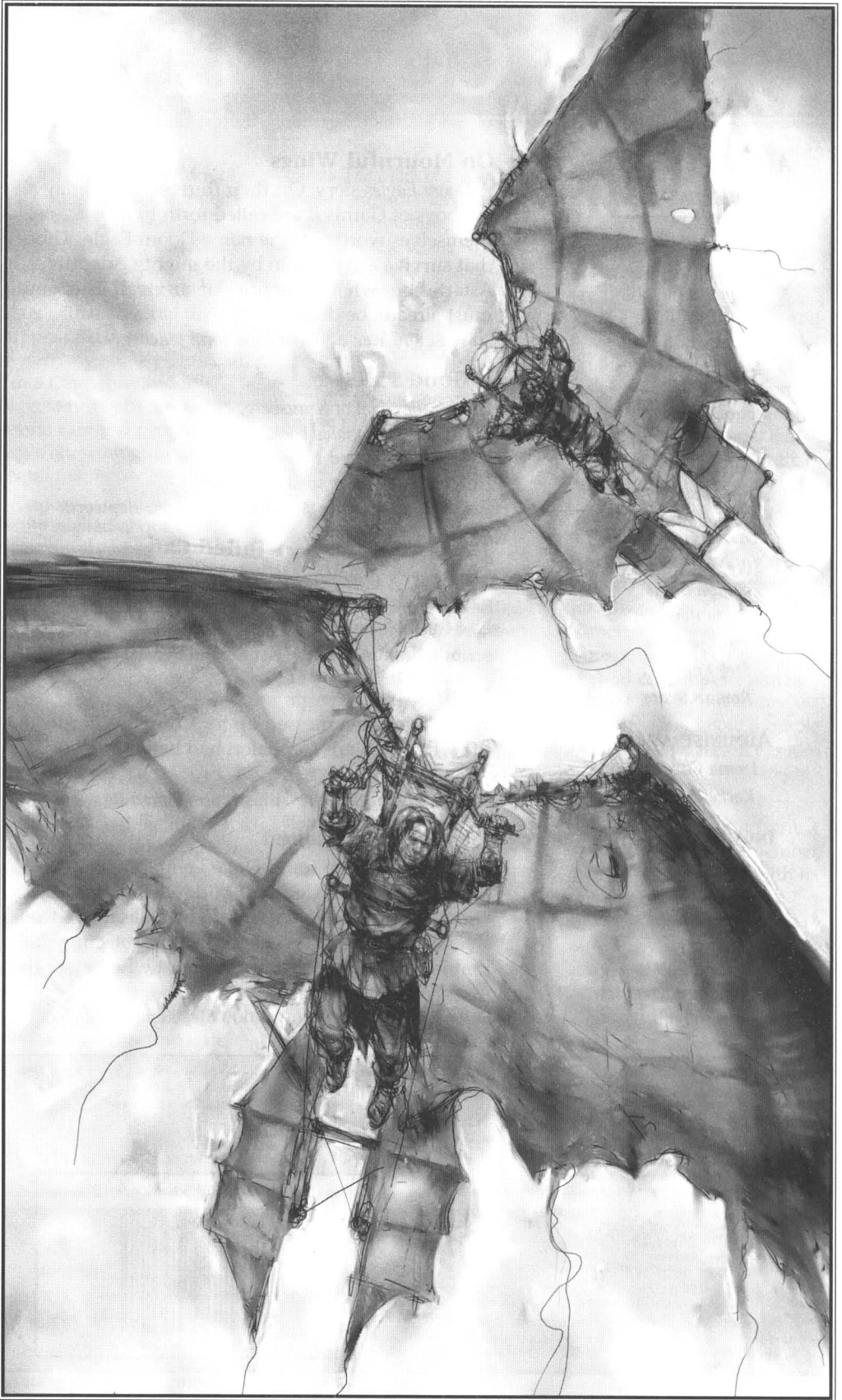
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THE SKY became a mirror, reflecting the ocean's anger. Tangled clouds flexed and boiled, wrestling for supremacy of the horizon.

A wall of wind and dust and water ripped from the maelstrom like a talon snatching at the land.

Someone screamed.

Everyone died.



ICA LURCHED awake, the memory of screaming voices withdrawing into his mind.

Around him the glider shuddered, inexpertly-fitted fuselage protesting at the pressures beyond. A rusted bolt dropped from the seal above his head and clattered on the floor.

He couldn't bring himself to care.

Dalus slept fitfully beside him. Ica wondered if he shared his twin's dark-rimmed eyes, prematurely lined features and weary, malnourished complexion. Probably. Sleep had become tortuous since... since then.

Dalus mumbled and fidgeted in his uncomfortable seat, disturbed.

The glider's descent became more pronounced and several passengers, all boys of thirteen, whispered urgent prayers

of protection. A tortured creak announced the deployment of ancient landing-gear.

Let it break, said a voice in Ica's head. Let it hit the runway and splinter into a thousand pieces. Let us spin along that narrow strip of plascrete above Table City, detonating like a messy citrusbloom and sitting there, half-buried under granite landslides, flaming and screaming and dying.

There had been a priest in the tiny Ecclesiarchy chapel at Kultoom, a priest with one eye and one flickering ocular implant. He had scars on both cheeks and the bulge of dog-tags concealed beneath his sackcloth robes. Sitting there in the shuddering glider, wishing for oblivion, Ica remembered the priest's words with a guilty wince. 'Seek not escape from misery in death,' the voice droned, eye clicking and whirring in the gloom, 'for He That Is Most Mighty gathers-not the Selfish Dead to his side.'

The priest was dead now. Everyone in Kultoom was dead now.



THE GLIDER landed amid the rain-lashed chimneys of Table City with the baby-scream of salt-clogged brakes. Its confused passengers disembarked meekly.

The principal city of Gathis II was a desolate metropolis: a scaled-up echo of the tribal communities and lugubrious villages dotting the few areas of planetary dry-land. Ramshackle dwellings clustered around one another for protection, smeared with the planet's only resource: chamack oil.

Produced from the pulped remains of chamack weed, the viscous sludge was exported by the Administratum as a cheap but foul-smelling sealant. Day and night the cargo gliders ferried their odoriferous loads from distant island-tribes, a whole year's harvest barely filling a single glider. Competition for access to the aquatic plantations was fierce and regularly bloody.

Ica pushed his face against rain-splattered blast-shields as an enormous vessel lifted from the ground, clouds of dust writhing like gaseous tendrils.

'Wonder where they go?' Dalus said, tired-looking eyes tracking the slab of metal into the brooding rain clouds.

Ica nodded. Inside, a voice said: It doesn't matter. Nothing matters.

'Keep moving!' someone called, and both twins returned to the winding line of youths, herded along by men in thick rain-cloaks. They trudged through the skyport, between looming parades of Imperial ships with their massive, mysterious engines.

'Question not your lot in this life,' the priest had said, dead voice echoing through Ica's mind. 'Be content to serve Him-Upon-The-Throne – however humble your station.'

Along the line Ica could see inquisitive eyes goggling at the gargantuan treasures looming on either side. Their expressions said, 'How do they work?' 'Where do they go?' 'What's out there?' But they'd never know; never leave the rain-pocked surfaces of Gathis; never see the stars.

And nothing they had ever done would be remembered.

A building loomed ahead, archaic façade crumbling. Its steep sides, surmounted by spines and sneering gargoyles, stood incongruous among the surrounding dockyards. With growing unease Ica realised the youths were headed directly for a gaping set of loading doors on the building's side.

Above, carved from vast stone slabs, stretching in a magnificent halo of angular symmetry, was a set of stylised feathers, angular and black. Not the graceful arcs of Administratum heraldry, with their sweeping curves and adamantium omegas; but rather squared and clipped, arranged in a brutal phalanx. And at the crux of the jagged raptor-wings, watching with mute melancholia, an ivory-white death-masque cast its gaze down upon the column of youths.

A winged skull.



THE SKY rumbled distantly. The twins barely bothered to look-up. 'Another storm,' Dalus grumbled, tinkering with his stretch-wings. Ica pushed at a ratchet joint and nodded.

'Mountain ghosts having a brawl, father?' he grinned.

The twins' father smiled, features creasing like old leather. He leaned over Ica's shoulder and helped tighten the wing-brace, tousling his son's hair warmly. 'That they are, son.'

Across the room, Dalus watched the movement closely, then returned to improving his glider with renewed vigour.



ICA HAD NEVER seen so many people. The interior of the building seemed endless ebony horizons pulling away on every side, gazing down upon an infinite ocean of young, bewildered heads.

'Every male of age thirteen to be present at Table City upon the thirteenth day of the thirteenth lunar month of every year. By Imperial command.'

Every year the same: the gliders would come to Kultoom and collect the youths. And sometimes, once in every decade, not all of them would return.

Inducted into the Imperial Navy, the rumour went.

Or sent as cannon fodder to fight the orks.

Or offered as a sacrifice to the Emperor's glory.

Or any one of a thousand different possibilities, all of them rich with uncertainty and legend.

Sent to appease the angry mountain ghosts, one rumour went.

Something far above screeched like a craghawk and a shape parted with the ceiling-shadows, resolving into a metallic platform suspended upon chains. The murmuring of thousands of youths arose throughout the chamber, a choir of fear and uncertainty.

The platform creaked to a pendulous halt far above and silence spread like a net.

The air was greasy and tense, spiderlegs scuttled up the spine and static whispered through the ears and nose.

Spotlights flickered to life, each a miniature thunderclap.

'Look,' Dalus said. Ica followed his gaze and there, threading through the crowd, were the black-robed minders who had ferried the boys from the gliders. Every so often they would stop, lizardlike, and tilt their heads, then scurry off again in another direction. Sometimes they'd look up at the distant platform as if someone stood there, watching, directing.

And then they began to Choose. A hand would reach out and tap at a shoulder, blindly feeling for – what? And then three or four of the ebony figures would close in, dragging away each victim in a knot of limbs.

Ica had expected shrill pleas for help: oh Emperor, don't let them take me! But no, those who were taken seemed placid, cowed somehow. Not one of them cried out.

Then something stabbed at Ica's mind. Something that crawled through his brain and knew everything. Something that said, Yes, you're correct not to care. You're already dead, and you know it.

And when black-gloved hands closed on his arms and hauled him away into the shadows, he didn't cry out in alarm. He didn't even mutter a prayer under his breath because, after all, what good what it do?

UNCONSCIOUS and drifting, Ica knew he'd never see Kultoom again. Never net slippery lacefish from his father's dirigible, never glide in frantic circles above the tribe's submerged chamack-patch, watching for theft-raids from neighbouring tribes.

There was no Kultoom to go back to. The dirigible had been pulped and hurled away into the shrieking skies. The other tribes had come and, unchallenged, plundered his ancestors' Chamack nurseries.

Someone slapped him, hard, and he vomited.

Next to him, Dalus said 'aack' and dribbled blood. To each side of Ica unconscious youths were dragged awake with punches and kicks, courtesy of those same black-cloaked figures from before. The one looming over grunted, satisfied with Ica's alertness, and stepped clear. The twins traded uncertain looks.

They knelt in a line of some thirty youths – those dragged from the building in the skyport, Ica supposed – on a rocky plateau. All around them towered the colossal crags of the Razorpeak Mountains, casting their ugly shadows far across the churning seas below.

Somewhere down there, Ica thought, is Table City, where thousands of bewildered youths are climbing back aboard gliders for the journey home, thanking the Emperor and wondering what had happened to those few who had been taken...

Ica tried to remember how he'd arrived at this dizzying place, but his memory faltered. There had been pain, briefly, then the vaguest sensation of machinery and engines – yes, he recognised the sound from the skyport – rising in volume.

To himself, he said, It doesn't matter how you got here. Nobody cares.

'Chapter serfs,' said a voice, thick with authority, 'that will be all.'

The black-robed men bowed mechanically, quickly descending a stairway hewn into the mountainside. Otherwise, the outcrop was empty, dwarfed by its parent mountain, with only a small cave in the vertical cliff-face nearby that could have concealed a person. Ica fixed his eyes on the rocky maw and tried to focus.

Something moved inside.

Something that twisted the light like mercury.

Something huge that somehow shifted with fluid grace.

Something that hulked forwards, polished facets decorated by ivory whorls, smouldering with reflected light. Panelled mirror-gauntlets curled around a blood-red staff and somewhere in the centre of the whole impossible being a pair of melancholy eyes stared out with incalculable wisdom and sadness. A metallic hood, pressed down over the sallow face, seemed to crackle with barely restrained energy.

'I am Thryn,' the behemoth said, mournful voice shivering along Ica's spine, 'Librarian Secundus of the Adeptus Astartes.'

The words meant nothing. Faces twisted by misery and fear, the youths stared as the Librarian took another step, mirror-armor shattering the light. Shoulder guards flexed, and Ica glimpsed again the mournful skull with its stretched wings, engraved upon the metal. The man's pale face drilled its hard gaze into each boy in-turn.

'You have been chosen,' the voice said, 'alone among thousands. Chosen not for your strength or your courage, not for your souls or your bodies. You've been chosen because you, each in their way, already understand an immutable truth.'

'You understand that you are already dead.'

Somewhere to Ica's left, a boy sobbed quietly.

'Disaster, loss, injury... a lifetime of exclusion and isolation – these are the memories you share. You must understand that whatever you feel, however great your grief, it is a mere nothing: an invisible fraction of the despair shared throughout our Imperium.'

Again something scuttled into Ica's brain, twitching its way through his memories. And when next the Librarian spoke, the voice seemed to enter Ica's very mind. 'You've been brought here to die. You must understand. Cherish your mortality. Cling to it. Today each of you will perish with such certainty that you are, in a sense,

already dead – just marking-time until the end.

'Behold the despair.'

And the ethereal fingers in Ica's skull sunk deeper and twisted, bringing-forth...

...screaming voices, and his mother's fingernails broke, one after another, until her grip was wrenched clear and she diminished into the maelstrom, screaming his name for help...

...and howling creatures with scarlet eyes and green skin like rotten leather clashed their tusks as women screamed and babies cried and cities burnt...

...and his father's workshop disintegrated, vindictive lightning obliterating the chaff as it circulated up into the banshee skies...

...and multitudes were slaughtered, and monstrosities stalked through bloody streets, chitin clacking, and not one horrified scream was louder than any other, and to every sufferer the world is ended, their life destroyed, and it was happening a million times over...

...and Ica screamed and Dalus screamed, although neither was heard, and outside the chapel detonated in a whirligig storm of masonry, and somewhere amongst the debris the old priest thrashed his limbs as the candles he'd so recently lit impaled him before racing-away on the wind...

...and the ghostly vessel swept past in a multicoloured broadside, unleashing colossal energies in an actinic torpedo-volley that punched gaping mouths into the blast-shields, and a hundred thousand human ants wordlessly shrieked the last of their oxygen into the void...

...and they didn't see their father die, but they heard his voice as the gather-hall sealant crumbled like dry leaves and haemorrhaged into the hurricane, and his howl of terror seemed to go on for ever and ever and ever and...

...and the lightning claws, writhing with evil, moved faster than the eye can follow, flaring against His force sword's rune-patterned blade, and when finally the ivory power armour splintered and the Warmaster's talons reached inside, on a million worlds a trillion humans sank to their knees, and nothing would ever be the same again...

...and the despair never ended.



ICA OPENED his eyes and prayed for death. All that he was would be nothing. The suffering of the universe eclipsed his own utterly. Nothing mattered.

'You will enter the cave,' the Librarian ordered, words alive with psychic energy, impossible to disobey. 'You'll enter the cave and inside you will die. You will rise through caverns of fear and violence, and with every footstep you draw closer to oblivion.'

The grave voice halted, and Ica tried to stand, turning to see his brother already rising up.

As usual.

Always first.

Others followed, desperate to obey the Librarian's command despite their aching minds. Thryn's silver gauntlet lifted, unfolded a single digit, and silently directed the youths into the cave.

One boy, further along the line, didn't stand. His eyes stared blankly, wide and lifeless. Ica understood. The weight of sadness had been too much to bear.



ICA PINWHEELED *higher, stretchwings fully extended. Every arm movement tilted him fractionally, sending him soaring above and across Kultoom Island.*

'Good, Ica! Good!' his father shouted up, cupped hands framing his proud face. 'Don't overbalance – that's it! Perfect!'

Above Ica Dalus glided in a series of long, lazy spirals. 'How's this, father?' he called, voice almost lost in the chasm of air.

The twins' father glanced away from Ica momentarily, nodding. 'Good.'

Ica peered up at his brother to exchange a smile in celebration of their first flight. But Dalus was frowning, and when he noticed Ica staring, his smile was too brief and too forced, before he manoeuvred his glider away.



TORCHES flickered in brackets, flames guttering with each movement of the air. Finally all the youths were inside, silent and cowed by the psychic trauma.

Inside Ica's head, a voice said: All dead, dead, dead, dead, dead...

Then the door closed.

One moment the daylight streamed in through the cave-entrance, framing the wide figure of the Librarian against the rain-streaked outcrop beyond. The next; iron blast doors slipped from grooves with a thunderclap clang and sealed the youths inside.

The youths exchanged uncertain glances. One boy, voice barely more than a whisper, said 'W-what's happening..?' Nobody replied.

Something hissed, and Ica turned to find water bubbling from a crack in the floor, veils of steam rising from the rapidly-enlarging puddle. Nearby, Dalus sniffed at the air. 'Stinks of sulphur...'

Again the voice invaded Ica's brain, the measured tones of Librarian Thryn filling his mind with its patient, mournful inflection. All the youths tilted their heads as if listening intently, and Ica knew that they too heard Thryn's words.

'Millennia ago, an object fell from the sky among the Razorpeak Mountains. Its impact shattered-apart the crust of this planet, destabilising it forever.

'It – like us – dies one second at a time. One day its core will solidify, its oceans will freeze and its people will starve. Until then it whiles away its mortality with fiery temper tantrums and indignant earthquakes.

'You are standing at the centre of this world's deepest despair.'

Ica returned his gaze to the growing puddle at his feet, now rising in a small hump of boiling fluid. He could feel its heat, even standing back. Across the floor of the chamber another fissure began to weep.

'Once every year' the voice droned, 'lava-flows beneath the Razorpeaks vent into the tunnels beneath your feet, filling them with scalding water.

'Within an hour this cavern, and all those above it, will be submerged. You will breathe boiling fluid. You will gag silently as the air is burnt from your lungs. This

chamber has a single exit. Take it, don't take it. Either way, you have minutes to live.'

The psychic contact ended, leaving Ica dizzy and nauseous.

An orifice in the rock nearby gurgled, hissed, then roared in incandescent fury. Water exploded forth, a mallet striking at the rockface and shattering into a million shards of liquid and steam.

A boy screamed, vapour rising from his blistering face like a shroud.

And Ica thought: So, this is it. Better to die now. Welcome it. Cherish it.

Except...

Except there's nothing left to lose, and dying in the next chamber is as good as dying here...

Frowning, not understanding why, Ica drove himself onwards, stepping towards the tunnel leading up and away. As quick as a wraith, Dalus streaked past him, rushing to be the first through. And behind them came the others, eyes dead, driven on only by the realisation that it made no difference.

The boy who clutched at his face, shrieking unintelligibly in pain, was left behind, cries becoming fainter and fainter, finally falling silent with a single water-choked sob.



ON THE DAY *It happened, the twins had sneaked into the gather-hall through the broken synthi-plex panel at its rear.*

Outside it was raining, and the droplets hammered on the building's corrugated roof like a harvest of gallberries, all falling at once. Outside the people of Kultoom tribe, as normal, laboured away their small, blind little lives.

Ica and Dalus were mighty kings, contesting the hand of a fair princess.

They were hero and villain, struggling for dominance.

They were Emperor and Horus (although neither knew which was which).

They were alien and human, or heretic and redeemer, or mutant and puritan.

Throughout the deserted hallway their wooden Jenrak-staves clacked together, whistling in broad sweeps and jabbing viciously. Giggling uncontrollably, feinting and lunging, Ica and Dalus were warriors.

And then their father heard their voices and crawled inside, demanding to know why they'd left their chores. Dalus had said they'd wanted to practise so they could defend the Chamack from neighbour tribes, but their father had seen it was a lie. He grinned slyly, and said, 'Fine. So, fight.'

So, beneath his stern gaze they'd fought. But the fun was gone, and every lunge that found its mark was rewarded with a curt 'Good', and every clumsy back-step elicited a burning silence from the gallery where their father stood, shaking his head or muttering.

And it wasn't a game any more, so Ica drove his stave deep into Dalus's stomach.

'A good hit.' their father said.

And it wasn't fun any more, so Dalus battered-aside Ica's defence and smashed his brother across the cheek. Ica dropped to the floor, blood ebbing from his nose.

And their father rushed to Ica, checking for broken bones. And he looked up at Dalus, standing over in a confusion of shame and triumph, and said:

'Stupid boy. Always going too far!'

And outside the thunder rumbled, and Kultoom waited for death.



BONES CLATTERED on the floor with every footfall. Steam churned behind the youths like the breath of a daemon, hot in pursuit of its prey. They drew closer together, staring into the face of razor-sided agony.

The cavern was bisected by a living cobweb of mossy lichen, clinging to strand upon strand of fibrous stalks and coiling roots. Another tunnel, again leading upwards, yawned on the other side of the mossy partition. But the web, glowing with bacterial luminescence, bore thorns. As long as Ica's finger, they sprouted like butcher-hook talons, curved like scimitars and equally as sharp. Tiny spines beneath the hood of every blade waited to barb any

hapless victim, lacerating flesh and splitting sinews. The forest of daggers, five deep, reached from cavern wall to cavern wall, from stalactite-strewn ceiling to uneven floor.

Somewhere, deeply enmeshed, hung a skeleton – its empty eyes watching Ica, saying, you’re like me. You’re all like me. All dead.

The tunnel from the previous chamber was already submerged, scampering air bubbles cratering the swiftly rising surface. Clouds of steam, reeking of sulphur, coiled insidiously amongst the boys.

Ica pushed himself forwards. Once the impetus to move on had taken root, once the inertia – urging him to give up – had been overcome, driving forwards was not so hard. He turned and, yes, there was Dalus, already approaching the dagger-thorns.

What difference does it make? Ica pondered. Might as well.

The first thorn ripped apart his thin jerkin and prized open his skin, a frosty fire that blossomed warmly.

The next hooked into his shoulder, scraping the dark places inside against bone and nerves. He groaned in pain and gritted his teeth.

Keep going.

The next thorn turned his thigh into a ploughfield of flesh-ribbons.

Something hit his cheek and he glanced-around, where a small youth sprayed arterial redness from a gaping wound in his neck. The boy’s eyes rolled upwards with something like relief.

Behind Ica, others were pushing through, moaning with each new open wound. To the rear somebody screamed as the boiling water trickled-over the lip of the previous tunnel and scorched an unshielded foot.

Ahead, Dalus pushed further into the tangle, incisions covering his arms and legs. He gripped at a branch, hauling himself forwards – only stopping to inspect his lacerated palms. He glanced briefly at Ica, as if checking his brother was still there, still watching, then frowned and barged his way forwards.

A thorn dragged itself along Ica’s brow, and he blinked against the red wetness oozing into his eye. He moved forwards, sliced and diced, not caring; feeling the pain with abstract distance – registering its presence but not its effect. An arm broke free, a chequerboard of cuts marking its surface.

A growl of triumph ahead broadcast Dalus’s release. Dalus stopped and turned, panting and bleeding, as inch by inch his brother wrestled free. Something splintered, a mossy crack of parting-twigs, and Ica stepped-clear.

He turned to look back at the others, some almost liberated, others hopelessly enmeshed, watching with eyes already rheumy and lifeless in death.

Some youths hadn’t even tried to get through. They stood or sat on the other side, impassively waiting for their doom as the water bubbled ever higher. Ica nodded, understanding how they felt, and turned away.

Dalus was already climbing towards the next tunnel. Ica blinked bloody tears from his eyes and followed.



THE SKY *quaked*, electric ribbons chasing across the horizon. Wind plucked at what few trees grew on Kultoom Island, eliciting a creaking and groaning that vocalised the tribe’s anxiety.

Tribesmen looked to the churning clouds and spat, cursing the dismal weather. The priest, dribbling in his zealotry, shouted a prayer to the Emperor, vying with the thunder to be heard. His oratory finished, he entered the chapel and sealed the door.

Windkites were hastily rescued from mid-air gyrations; chamack harvesters were moored securely, and everywhere was the sound of slamming shutters and doors.

The sky went black.

In their hut, Ica and Dalus, footfalls heavy with sulky indignation, descended into the damp darkness of the cellar. Their mother’s voice followed after.

'...and stay down there 'til you learn obedience! If you can't be trusted to finish your chores, seems to me you can't be trusted to use a wing-glider either!'

At this the twins both gagged in alarm, turning to the cross-armed silhouette at the top of the stairs with a cry, 'But-!'

'But nothing, night take you! No gliding for a month! And now your father's out in the rain, fixing-up that Emperor-damned panel, and who knows where he'll find cover if the storm hits and how we'll survive if he's hurt and why can't you be obedient like Father Lemuel says and...' The whinnying voice faded-away as the door slammed and their mother stalked off to bolt the shutters.

In the darkness, Ica sniffed back the blood in his nose. He could feel Dalus glaring across the room.



THROUGH chambers and caverns, they ran. Scalding water churned from every crevice, dousing the flickering torches one-by-one.

In one chamber the floor was a gravelpit of smouldering embers, heated by fire-red magma that cooled, sludgelike, in scattered puddles. The youths – those who dared – scampered across in a flurry of yelps and explosions of sparks. Some fell with a howl into the curdling lava, clawing at the air and shrieking until their skin charred and their lungs filled with fire.

In one cavern a firestorm of shrapnel and smoke burst from some hidden alcove among the stalactites, reacting to the unblinking red eye of a motion-sensor embedded in one wall. Some of the adolescents lurked at the room's entrance, dividing their terrified glances between the rising water behind and that glaring ruby light, choosing who would live and who would die. Others rushed by, ducking and dodging. Their flesh and bone was dissolved in the resulting whirlwind of metal, screams ripped away in a rush of smoke and dust. A few – those who neither hesitated nor rushed – made it through.

In one chamber the ground gave way to an echoing chasm lined by splintered bones. Only by leaping across then scrabbling amid the jagged handholds of the opposite rock face could the youths pass. The screams of those who fell, punctuated by the splintering cracks of impact, echoed throughout the hollow-mountain forever.

And always the water rose, dogging at their heels, curling its tendrils, wrapping everything in a sulphurous haze. The mountain filled from the base upwards, and with every step the remaining air grew hotter and more stifling.

Ica, muscles protesting, passed obstacle after obstacle, forever convinced that each test would be the last. Only by accepting his own death could he march across scorching coal fragments. Only by understanding he was nothing could he amble unhurriedly past an unflickering motion-sensor. Only by knowing that he was dying one second at a time, that he was already dead and forgotten, that nothing he had ever done would be remembered, could he hurl himself into the abyss, then clamber, hands and arms lacerated, to his feet.

He was surviving and he didn't care.

And all the time, driven on like some unstoppable dervish, Dalus was one step ahead; turning back to watch Ica but never rushing to his aid when he faltered. Their clothes hung in shreds, their skin was a patchwork of scrapes and cuts. Once Dalus had turned to Ica, eyes burning, and said: 'Try to keep up, brother...'

And then they passed through the final cavern and entered a tunnel that twisted and grew narrower, coiling slowly downwards. Ica, palms and knees shredded, struggled to keep sight of his brother's retreating form.

'Dalus?' he panted. 'T-the water, it'll...'

'I know,' came the curt reply. 'It'll come down after us.'

The tunnel grew steeper, walls closing-in until the brothers writhed, wormlike, using only toes and elbows. How many youths remained behind them Ica didn't know. He couldn't turn his head, even if there were light. He was blind, a maggot within a mountain.

The ghost of a scream filtered-along the corkscrew tunnel: a million miles away. Somewhere far above scalding water lapped at the edge of the descending shaft, waiting...

Ica could see it happening, in his mind. The water – at first only a few droplets – would ebb its way over the lip of the cavern. As it rose the trickle became a stream, then a river, then a tsunami that tumbled down through the passageway, growing faster and faster as the walls grew closer, roaring in sulphurous fury.

And then there was light. Hurting Ica's eyes, making him wince. And there was Dalus, worming his way from the tunnel, shredded legs kicking as he exited.

And the mountain shook as the waterspout filled up, and all around the air began to rush by, driven on by the wall of liquid rage charging at his heels.

And the sun didn't look sweet when he saw it, and he felt no relief at the freshness of the air. He was still dead. Still forgotten.

Only two other youths clambered from the tunnel behind them, faces pale and eyes ringed as if they had been existing underground for years.

They stood on a ledge, jutting from a sheer rockface on the mountainside, and the ground fell away in all directions. The distant ocean was a pond of ripples from this height. And beyond, with sides so sheer that even the craghawks could find no nesting spots, was the Ghostmountain: the tallest of all the Razorpeaks, its very existence a toothy, snarled challenge to the clouds.

Ica stared at it and murmured, 'Emperor preserve...' Its enormity compacted his misery, reminded him of his scale. You are nothing, he told himself. You are nothing and in a moment you will die, punched from this ledge by a fist of water. Maybe your bones will shatter at the impact, driving shards of ivory into your brain. Maybe you'll die quickly. Or maybe you'll be cannoned out into the air, screaming as the water burns your skin and your eyes dissolve. Maybe you'll plummet, arms thrashing, to the fanged rocks at the base of the mountain.

Maybe you'll die in pain. Maybe you won't.

But you'll die. It's so certain that you'll die, you might as well already be dead.

And look, there's nowhere left to go. Nowhere left to run.

And the mountain shook, and the water roared, and Ica remembered.

His mother, screaming as the storm hit and the roof of the hut separated like a jigsaw, trying to wrench open the cellar door to seek sanctuary. She buried her fingernails in the rotten wood of the strut support as behind her the walls of the house went convex and shredded like paper.

'Look,' grunted Dalus curtly, returning Ica to reality. He pointed towards a tangled shape at the farthest corner of the ledge.

A twisted morsel of canvas, stretched to near-tautness by a metal frame, protruded like a shark-fin. Other components – rusted spring mounts and ragged tail rudders, decaying tensile pins and mangled harness struts – lurked within the heap.

'Gliders...' Ica mumbled numbly. Behind him the mountain growled.

And the voice in his head whispered: So you can go on.

Might as well.

Nothing to lose.

Dalus was already beside the pile, snatching at the decaying apparatus, selecting the best glider kit. He hefted the concertina stretch wings onto his back and began buckling the harness around his chest, eyes glowering in determination. Ica, legs ready to collapse beneath the despair filling his mind, simply reached out a hand and dragged at whatever random assemblage it touched. The wings hung shredded and near-useless, the harness little more than crossed bandoliers of pleated chamack-twine.

Doesn't matter. Put it on.

The mountain bellowed, a bull-roar of fury. The air rushing from the tunnel-mouth became a physical force, pushing the twins backwards towards the edge. One of the other youths lunged for the pile of gliders, eyes wide. The final survivor simply stood and stared, waiting.

Then the world was thrown on its head.



KULTOOM TRIBE *died. Kultoom Island shredded like an almost-dead body, thrashing itself uselessly, flailing at its tormentor and struggling to hold in its own viscera.*

The storm closed with hungry malevolence; anonymous and implacable.

The universe, with no more regard than a man might have for an insect beneath his boot, reached out and expunged a population.



WITH A cockroach snap the wind unfurled the tattered wings of Ica's glider and threw him across the distant ocean. From the corner of his madly-oscillating view he registered the mountainside erupting in a gargantuan waterspout, cascading downwards in sheets of rainbow-infested spray – but it was distant, unimportant. A scream dwindled on the howling wind.

Then it was all gone: obliterated in a dizzying split-second, and when reality coalesced Ica was gliding erratically, stranded within a gulf of air. The breath, sucked from his lungs, returned in heaving gasps, his head pounding with the angry rhythm of his pulse. Nearby, fighting for stability, Dalus swooped past, stretch wings fully extended. Petulant turbulence buffeted Ica and he over-tilted, tumbling briefly in a flurry of mangled wings and tail blades. The descent flattened into an awkward, crippled equilibrium, doomed to fail before long.

The third youth, who had snatched at the pile of gliders moments before the water thundered from the tunnel, cried out nearby. Ica's gaze darted sideways to see the ragged collection of components he'd selected parting like crumbling earth, fragmenting in a cloud of wafting fabrics and spinning shards of metal. The small shape at its epicentre, arms flailing uselessly, tumbled away towards the ocean. He screamed all the way.

Dalus's trajectory levelled out, once again in front of Ica, and he turned to deliver another infuriating grin, sunken eyes twinkling in – what? Triumph?

Then both twins stared forwards, driven-on by the furious gales ripping between the razorpeak summits. To fly into the wind was impossible, retaining balance and altitude was the only recourse. So, bloodied and scarred, exhausted physically and mentally, the twins were silent as before them the Ghostmountain loomed closer.



AFTERWARDS, *the world was black. Not the dull, dry blackness of a firestorm or some other act of violence, but rather the polished blackness of sea-slippery rock. The very earth had been torn apart, cleaved-up from the rocks below like a scalp from a skull. And yes, there was debris, but not much: no devastated huts or mangled vehicles, but rather scattered patches of dust that might once have been homes, or the splattered bloodspray of liquid metal, melted and hurled away by vicious lighting.*

Ica and Dalus crawled from the cellar that had become their burrow, and stared at all that was left of their lives.

On the first day, and even the second, there was no real pain. The despair had yet to descend and instead they wandered the pulverised island in a fugue.

On the third day the reality began to crystallise. They would cry occasionally, though somehow never enough to satisfy the hidden despair. The need to express, to vent, went unresolved. They could not bear to look at one another, nor speak.

On the fourth day, when hunger began to cramp their stomachs, the numbness began to return. They would find some distraction or task – some beleaguered seabird or semi-successful fishing attempt – and all would seem normal, until the mind allowed itself to wander and the memory of... of events returned. And every time the pain would return: an endless loop of remembrance and reaction.

On the fifth day the glider came.

'Every male of age thirteen to be present at Table City upon the thirteenth day of the thirteenth lunar month of every year. By Imperial command.'

It almost passed over, sighting from its aerial vantage nothing but the wasted remains of a community: a tribe reduced to a naked rocky

crag by the tempest-whims of an unstable world.

But Dalus flashed light from a jagged shard of mirror at the distant wraith, and it began the long spiralling descent that would bring it to the last survivors of Kultoom Island.

And they went aboard to die.



TWICE ICA'S stretch wings hissed as fabric tore, and twice he found himself lurching impossibly to the left or right, preparing for the terminal descent to the waves below.

Twice the voice in his mind said, Yes – let me die! And twice he righted himself, somehow finding the stability to continue. The Ghostmountain no longer loomed across the horizon of the world. This close, it was the world.

'Where will we land, brother?' Ica called ahead to where Dalus effortlessly hung aloft. His brother didn't reply. Ica called out again, louder this time, 'I said, 'where wi–'

'I heard.' Dalus looked back, piercing his twin with a stare. 'And how should I know?' Then he adjusted his shoulders, dipped forward and streaked ahead.

At times the wind seemed to reach underneath Ica, a seemingly gentle hand to cradle his exposed form, only to hurl him high into the air, or drop away from underneath, leaving him tumbling and helpless. At such moments only fatalistic momentum – the certainty that it made no difference whether one went on or gave in – allowed him to struggle against the pockets and troughs of resistance to stay level.

Every second brought him closer to the Ghostmountain until it seemed to become a planet, tumbling across the horizon of Gathis, to inevitably collide, showering all of existence in chaotic planetary viscera and arterial lava. Ica found himself wishing it would, that he could ride the crest of that fiery cataclysm and burn out in the air, an insignificant spark.

In his abstract state he barely felt the fingers of power that once more delved into his mind. He could barely summon the energy to retch, gagging uselessly at the

psychic contact. The voice of Librarian Thryn entered his brain again, stabbing at the back of his eyeballs.

'There...!' it hissed, and unbidden his eyes swivelled to a craggy rockface, where – if he winced against the stinging air and focused – he could make out a shadowy recess above a flat ledge. Another cave. Ahead he could see Dalus reacting similarly, face turning to the distant platform.

So the twins tilted their exhausted, ruined bodies towards the ledge, and clumsily, awkwardly, descended.



THE STONE felt like a bed of feathers, welcoming and cushioning Ica's tumbling form. In some distant part of his brain he was aware of the ruinous landing, vaguely noting the spreading pain but unable to wince or groan.

Dalus was already on his feet, of course. He cast off his stretch wings in a blur, then clenched his fists and punched the air in triumph.

'First!' he called-out to the mountain, spinning to stare at his panting brother with eyes full of madness. 'I beat you!'

Ica stammered, uncertain. 'W-what?'

'I beat you. I came first.' Dalus's grin extended further-still, an ugly gash in his sallow, pale features. 'Now we'll die, b-but it won't matter because... because when we do you'll know I'm best, and the world will know I came first, and, and–' The grin became something else – a grimace of pain and rage which bubbled up from his eyes and sent tears streaking across his face until his voice cracked and he couldn't continue. Ica stared, astonished and terrified at his twin's tantrum, unable to understand. For the first time since he could remember Dalus looked like a child – shredded and exhausted by a hateful world – but a child nonetheless, with all the petulance and pettiness a child should command.

Then the wind seemed to be rushing directly down upon their heads: a warm gale that grew hotter and hotter. Ica tilted his tired neck and there, descending on a

mantle of smoke and superheated air, was Librarian Thryn. Like a pair of shimmering wings unfurling from his colossal shoulders, twin streams of heat diminished slowly until his massive feet crunched upon the rocks and his metallic form settled.

'Survivors...' he said, sunken eyes drinking-in their features. 'Survivors who are dead, and yet live. Hm. Have a care with feelings of relief, young ones. You'll die yet.'

Ica struggled against the energy filling his brain, twisting his groans of exhaustion into words. 'W-why? Why do these things to us?'

Thryn smiled, psychic hood crackling. 'Let us see...' he hissed.

And the energies reached out and infiltrated the twins' minds, and they saw—

Ica's mind was a mountainside. A descending slope of anguish that neither levelled off nor ended abruptly in a chasm of fatalism. It rushed onwards, descending too far into misery to ever consider turning about and rescaling, yet too steep and unbroken to ever reach its suicidal conclusion.

Ica's own life was worth nothing to him.

To go on, unfeeling and uncaring, was just as easy as giving up.

Librarian Thryn smiled to himself.

Dalus's mind was a minefield of bitterness and pain.

In every challenge, in every task, there was judgement. There was his father's attention, grudgingly given and rarely complimentary. There was his mother's love, distant and awkward.

And there was Ica. Ica, his father's favourite. Ica, to whom his mother cried out before her death. Ica who was loved and spoilt. Ica who could do no wrong. Ica who was an hour older than he. Ica who would inherit their father's chamack. Ica who, by dint of sixty Emperor-damned minutes, mattered.

Dalus's own life was worth nothing to him. All that mattered was outdoing his brother, coming first, finally demonstrating to his parents – far too late – that he the younger brother, he the runt, he the scorned and unloved and uncared-for, that he was the better!

To go on, raging and jealous and desperate for attention, was far easier than giving up.

Librarian Thryn frowned.

WHEN REALITY returned, the wind howled like a child. Ica opened his eyes to a world refracted by tears and Thryn's mournful voice filling his mind.

'All of creation suffers, young ones. Only in accepting our own mortality can we... make a difference. Only in bearing the burden of our failures can we find the strength to go on. Only in detachment from glory, or honour, or jealousy... from life itself can we hope to spare others from grief.

'We are Doom Eagles. And we are already dead.'

A silver gauntlet raised to point at Ica, the extended digit filling his world.

'You may enter, young one. Enter and discover the Eyrie of the Doom Eagles. Enter in humble and thankful service of the Golden Throne. But remember: you have not survived, this day. You are dead now. Never forget.'

And Ica stood, numbly. Nothing was real. Nothing mattered. The wind screamed, almost tearing him away into the abyss, and he staggered, step by step, into the gloom of the cave. Behind him, he knew, Librarian Thryn followed, his hulking frame stalking gracefully into the welcoming shadows beyond.

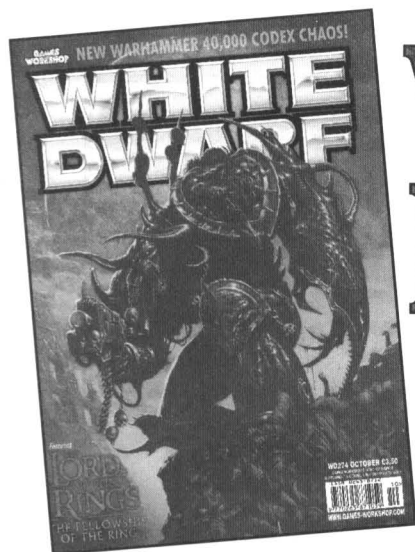
And he didn't look back, but he could hear the blast door closing, shutting out the rain. He could hear the wind, growing stronger by the second. And he could hear his brother, sobbing gently. Moments before the blast door closed, moments before Ica's life as a peasant of Gathis ended and his non-life as a Doom Eagle began, he heard his twin cry out to the empty, aching universe:

'But I came first! It's not fair!'

And Ica said to himself: No, it's not fair. It's life.

The Ghostmountain sealed with a thump, and the twins, each in their own way, died. ♣





WHITE DWARF

White Dwarf is Games Workshop's monthly magazine. Each issue showcases all the latest games and miniatures and is packed with exciting articles including tactical advice on how to get the most from your army on the field of battle, tips for painting your miniatures, and tense battle reports highlighting the trials and tribulations of commanding an army.

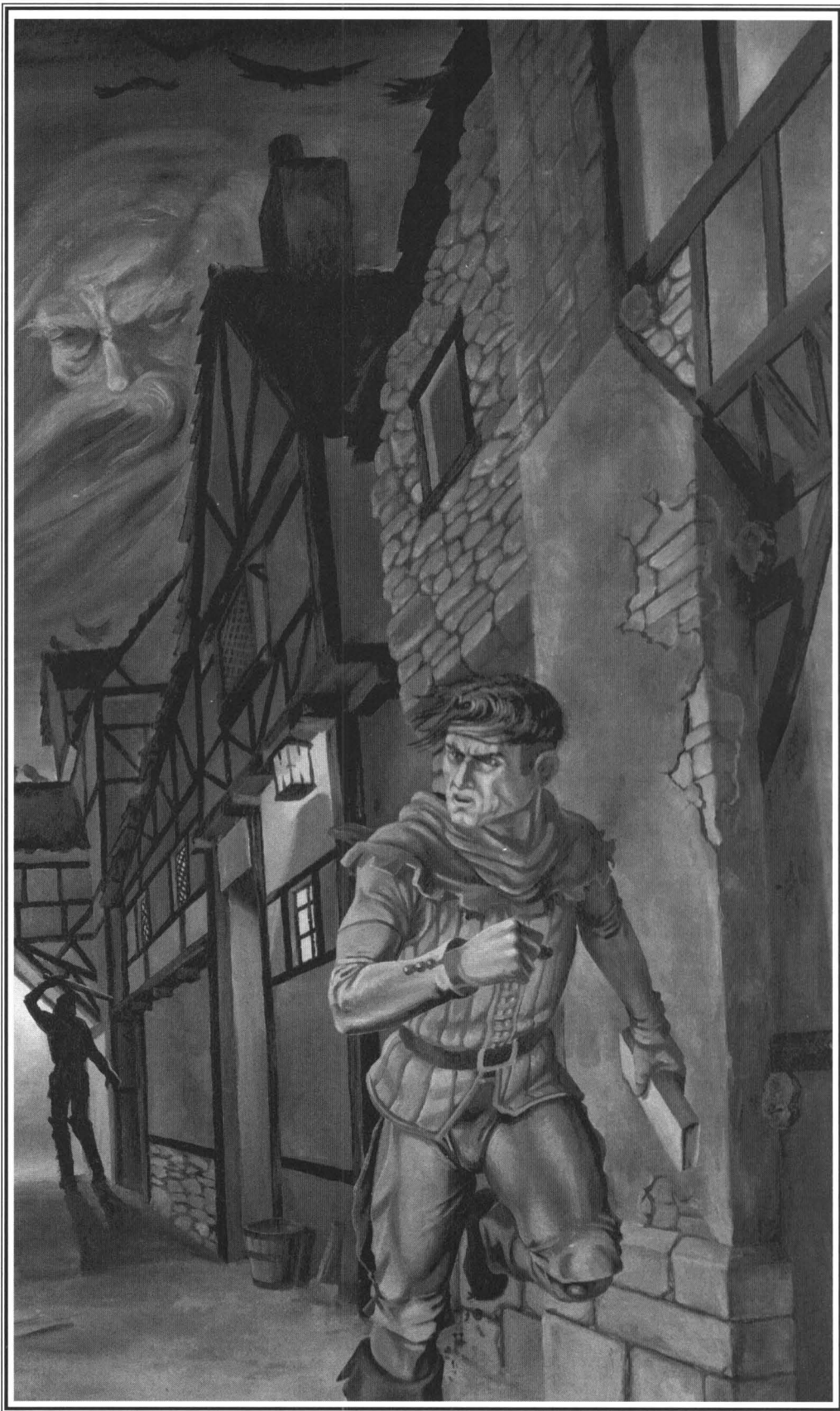
BLACK CRUSADE

It's a dark day for the Imperium as the October issue of White Dwarf unveils the new Codex: Chaos Space Marines. As always, there is a whole legion of articles for Warhammer and The Lord of The Rings, too...

- This month our investigation into the powers of Chaos turns to Tzeentch, the Changer of Ways.
- Index Astartes looks at the Salamanders Space Marine Chapter, and includes the rules for using them in games of Warhammer 40,000.
- In this month's battle report Dark Elves defend a Watchtower against a rampaging Chaos horde.
- We present a special preview of The Two Towers, our new The Lord of The Rings battle game.
- Elsewhere in our The Lord of The Rings section we present the "Points Match" rules. These will enable you to take a more competitive approach to playing games of The Lord of The Rings.



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A Good Thief

by Simon Jowett

IS THAT IT, François Villon wondered? The polite applause that greeted the end of his performance failed to rise above a ripple and was quickly drowned out by the babble of his erstwhile audience taking up conversations that had been interrupted by the Graf's call for silence, which had also served as Villon's cue to begin.

This evening's poem had been Villon's most ambitious work: the product of a week's pacing through the town's muddy streets and along the marshy banks that bounded the tributary of the Reik that provided Wallenholt with its connection to the civilised centres of the Empire. A week spent honing every line, shaping every verse and memorising each new version. And for what? To flatter the ego of his patron, Bruno, Graf von Wallenholt, and to interrupt the drinking of those townsfolk and travelling traders who made up what passed for 'society' in this boggy backwater.

Sigmar take them, Villon shrugged inwardly. It still beats working for a living. He reached for one of the wine-filled goblets on a passing servant's tray, drained its contents and reached for another from the tray of a servant passing in the opposite direction.

Yes, he reminded himself as the blood-rich wine slid easily down his throat, it was better to live as a pampered pet in this out-of-the-way place, than to rot in chains in one of Marienburg's danker oubliettes – which was where he would have spent the last months, had certain friends and drinking companions not warned him of the warrant that had been sworn against him by that hypocritical prig, Gerhard von Klatch.

Hypocritical prig or not, Villon would not have deliberately made an enemy of one of the Merchant Princes of Marienburg. It was just that everyone knew about the extra-marital activities of von Klatch's wife and, when set against von Klatch's pompous pronouncements on the subject of 'family values', they seemed the perfect subject for a rhyme. Or, they seemed so to Villon's wine-fuddled brain at some point in the midst of a week-long binge financed by the 'acquisition' of the collection money from the temple of a middle-ranking deity near the pleasure gardens.

Had he been sober – or even within hailing distance of sobriety – Villon might have thought twice before extemporising the poem that later saw print as 'Madame Klatch's Menagerie'. A number of his other drunken satires had been transcribed and circulated around the docks and lower quarters of the city, but he would never have imagined that a transcript of his latest opus might find its way from the pages of Marienburg's yellow papers – scurrilous rumour-sheets printed on stuff better suited for use in the privy than for the absorption of ink – to those of a more respectable journal, more usually associated with political and economic news. Obviously, von Klatch had enemies and Villon's rhyme was a convenient weapon to hurl against the old windbag's political ambitions.

'The Heroic hexameter,' the voice came from behind Villon as he waved to a flagon-bearing servant with his now-empty goblet. 'An unusual choice.'

Villon turned. The speaker was a stranger to Wallenholt – one of a small group of visitors in whose honour the Graf had ordered this soirée. Villon had

assumed them to be of greater-than-average wealth and power to warrant the full deployment of the Graf's hospitality, though the man he found himself looking at as the servant refilled his goblet showed very little outward sign of wealth or power. Dressed from head to toe in close-napped black velvet, he was over average height and build. His features, though edging on the handsome, were pale grey eyes, a narrow nose, a black beard, neatly trimmed and peppered with grey – a description that might apply equally to an uncountable number of men.

What marked this man out to Villon's eyes, eyes which had years of practice in judging the relative wealth of potential victims and/or patrons, was an absence of certain details: he wore no house, guild or family insignia.

And he recognised the Heroic hexameter, a six-beat rhythm that had passed out of poetic favour centuries ago.

'It was an experiment,' Villon replied, adopting his most refined accent and most polite form of address. 'I heard La Rondeau de Sigmund when a child and the six-beat metre struck me then as very strange and beautiful. And very challenging to those like us who are more used to the pentameter that is the fashion of today's verse. You are a man of rare sensibilities, sir, to recognise it.'

'I have no use for poets,' the stranger cut across Villon's attempt at flattery. 'The Graf tells me that you cannot read or write. Is that true?'

'There is more to writing than the mere act of making marks on paper,' Villon shot back, more forcefully than was seemly. Despite his privileged status within the Graf's household – he had no other duties than to compose verse to flatter his lord's vanity and act as a living example of Wallenholt's rising status within the Empire – he was still a servant. And the man whose aesthetic sense he had just insulted was an honoured guest.

Mouth running away with you again, François, he scolded himself. He cursed the third goblet of wine and searched for a form of words to ease the situation.

'But I... I know enough to make my mark,' was all he could find to say. That 'mark' was no more than a shaky 'V' which could be found on the very few documents he had ever been required to sign – mostly papers recording his appearances in court to answer charges of street theft, swindling and burglary. When one had been born in the gutter and set to thieving almost as soon as one could walk, the learning of letters was not a priority.

The stranger cocked an eyebrow. To Villon's surprise, he seemed amused.

'An illiterate poet,' he murmured. Villon was unsure whether he intended anyone to hear him. 'An interesting contradiction.'

At that moment, the Graf swept up to them. Villon's heart jumped – had he heard that his pet poet was arguing with one of his guests? If so, the best he could hope for was to be escorted beyond the town walls to return to the sorry state in which he had fetched up in Wallenholt after fleeing the warrant in Marienburg. Villon didn't relish the thought – day upon day of muddy roads, eating roots and berries and sleeping up trees to avoid roaming predators.

'Magister,' the Graf began without sparing Villon a glance. 'There is someone I have been meaning to introduce to you...'

Villon's heart resumed a more sedate rhythm as the Graf led the stranger away. Villon took this as his cue to quit the evening's festivities; the longer he stayed, the more he would drink; and the more he drank, the more likely he would be to say something else that he would regret.

He moved towards the doors to the hall unnoticed and unmolested by any of the other guests – proof, he believed of the regard for poetry among Wallenholt's elite. He had been lucky, shortly after arriving in the town, to hear that the Graf had a taste for verse. What was it about men of power that they desired some recognition of their finer sensibilities? The Graf had begun to talk of a printed collection of Villon's verse – calf-bound, subscription only – though the von Wallenholt name would be the only one to appear on its pages.

At the doors he paused and looked back into the hall. He spotted the Graf and the stranger; they were talking to, or rather

being talked at, by another of the out-of-townners. Probably a travelling representative of the Nuln Cheesemakers Guild, Villon chuckled to himself. Now, perhaps, the stranger would feel more appreciative of the conversation of poets.



VILLON! He was back in the Blind Monk, on Grosse-festenplatz, down by the docks. He had drunk far too much cheap wine to be sure of exactly how long he had been in the tavern – longer than a day, not so long as a full week.

‘A verse!’ the cry went up around the room. ‘A verse from Villon!’ The cry was repeated; a steady drumming of tankards and fists upon the tavern’s tables beat against the fetid, belch-ridden air.

This was how it always happened: such was his reputation that, if he spent long enough in one tavern and drank enough wine, one of his fellow drinkers would think to call for a verse. And, because he had spent enough time in that tavern and had drunk more than enough wine, he would, after a moment’s thought, oblige:

‘I rhyme of the lady, von Klatch...’



FRANÇOIS! The years had fallen away; he was in Brother Nicodaemus’s study. A bitter winter breeze was slicing through the shutters of the room’s single window.

‘François!’ the old priest repeated. He was the only adult the young urchin could remember taking the time to repeat an instruction. More usually, his lack of attention was rewarded with a slap about the head.

‘Yes, father,’ Villon looked at the priest. He had been thinking about how cold he felt. Nicodaemus never seemed to feel the cold, not did any of the other priests – though Villon could tell by their

expressions whenever they saw him that his presence in their monastery was as welcome as the stench of an over-full privy pot.

‘I asked you to explain the pentameter, François,’ Nicodaemus told him. The old man had caught the young Villon trying to steal from the vegetable garden within the monastery walls. He was surprisingly nimble and strong for an old man and, despite his gentle demeanour, more than willing to administer enough of a beating to pacify the struggling young thief.

But that had been the last time he had touched Villon. Nicodaemus, it seemed, had certain theories about the training of the young and, before he died, he wished to test them. Villon had appeared at just the right time and presented quite a challenge.

‘A pentameter is a line made up of five feet,’ Villon parroted.

‘Very good. And what is a foot?’

‘A foot is a poetical unit of two syllables,’ Villon replied. ‘The Gothic pentameter is the most popular of these, in which the stress is placed on the second syllable.’

‘Very good!’ Nicodaemus smiled. He had not asked Villon to explain the Gothic pentameter, but he could see that, of all the subjects he had introduced to the child, poetry was the one that most drew him in. It seemed that his theories may bear fruit after all.

‘Extemporise upon the Gothic pentameter for me,’ Nicodaemus continued. Villon had already begun to exhibit his peculiar gift for creating verse on the spur of the moment and the priest regularly used this as a means of maintaining the boy’s interest. ‘I shall beat time.’ He began to stamp rhythmically upon the flagstone floor. Villon began:

‘The twin-tailed comet crossed the sky, Bright Sigmar’s birth to prophesy...’



VILLON! The voice was louder, rougher, more insistent. The drumming had also changed. No

longer the slapping of the old monk's sandals on the bare flags, it had the demanding, heavy quality of a fist on wood.

'Villon, in the name of the Graf, open this door!'

Villon opened his eyes. He was in his small room in the servants' wing of the Graf von Wallenholt's manor house. Weak, early morning sunlight leaked in through the room's high, narrow window, running in a shaft to the door. The door jumped and shuddered with each impact from the other side.

This, he quickly realised, was not a dream.



HIS ROOM might have been small, Villon reflected, but it had been dry and private – unlike the space he now found himself in: set well below ground level, it was broader than his room, but the moss-covered stones of its walls ran with damp, it stank like an open sewer and a set of bars, each as thick as a man's wrist, ran from floor to ceiling, bisecting the space and standing between Villon and the door.

Nor was he alone. A rotund imbecile, who Villon decided looked more toad than man, squatted in the dampest corner of the cell. He hadn't moved since Villon had arrived: thrown through the then-open gate in the bars by the constables who had burst into his room the moment he opened the door, bullied him into his clothes and dragged him down seemingly-endless flights of stairs, each one darker and damper than its predecessor.

'A new friend for you, Tobias,' one of the constables shouted after the gate had clanged shut. His fellow law-keepers laughed. Tobias the toad-man regarded Villon with eyes that bulged so far from his face that Villon expected them to burst like water-filled bladders thrown by mischievous children. And while he stared at the new arrival, Tobias licked his lips.

For all Villon knew, Tobias might still be licking his lips. The constables had taken their lanterns with them and left the dungeon in complete darkness.

This wasn't a new experience for Villon. Incarceration was a hazard he had lived with since he stole his first loaf, at the age of four or five; not knowing his exact date of birth, he couldn't be sure. Every one of his companions had likewise spent time in various cells, but Villon was a better thief than most, was rarely spotted in the commission of his crimes and was caught less often still. Even when the constabulary or militia knew he was the culprit, he was usually able to evade them in the narrow maze of Marienburg's rookeries – sprawling acres of close-packed slums into which a wanted man could disappear and into which the officers of the law would not enter unless equipped as if for war.

There were taverns in the rookeries, buyers and sellers of stolen goods and women who were more than happy to entertain a man flushed with loot from his latest job. By the time his money was spent, the constables would be occupied with other crimes and the way would be clear for Villon to set about refilling his pockets.

But, since his arrival in Wallenholt – or since the Graf decided to become his patron, at least – Villon's conduct had been exemplary. The allowance he received from the Graf, though not extravagant, was sufficient; he ate with the servants, when not performing for the Graf, and avoided indulging in prolonged bouts of drinking, hence the poetry he had composed since his arrival had been of the most proper and decorous type. In fact, the three goblets he had drunk the night before his arrest had been the most wine he had consumed for close to a month...

That had to be it. The guest in black. Monsieur 'I have no use for poets'. The pompous lick-spittle must have taken offence at something in Villon's tone after all. Not for the first time, he cursed the foibles and caprice of the wealthy, then set to thinking about how best to effect his escape from this pit. His accuser would be gone in a few days' time – he might already have left Wallenholt. All Villon would have

to do was re-establish himself in the Graf's favour. Knowing the Graf, a poem of the most astonishing and shameless flattery would do the job. Vanity was one of the foibles of the wealthy he had used to his advantage many times in the past.

He had begun to sift through possible subjects for his verse when he heard a soft scraping from the far side of the cell. This was followed by a wet-lipped, child-like giggle, then the scraping resumed. It sounded as if something soft and heavy was being dragged – or was dragging itself – across the rough stone floor.

'You want to keep those bloated guts inside your scab-ridden skin, Tobias,' he spoke into the darkness. 'You'll stay exactly where you are.'



VILLON WAS on his feet as soon as he heard the door opening. 'Ah, good constable, at last,' he began. 'There has clearly been some egregious error, but I believe I know a way to solve the problem and smooth any ruffled feathers. If you would only take a brief message to the Graf, this unfortunate affair will soon be at an end.'

'You may have received little schooling, but you have certainly mastered the art of buttock-kissing.' A lantern's shutter hinged back with a clank. Villon blinked in the sudden light until, as his eyes grew accustomed to the lantern's glow, he was able to make out the features of the speaker: fine, but not quite handsome; regular, but unremarkable.

'Kind sir, we meet again,' he adjusted his approach, determined not to give his accuser further offence. 'I had hoped to find a way to mend any injury I had caused you when we last met. Though doubtless I deserve the time I have spent in this darkness, cut off from the light of those such as your good self and my lord the Graf—'

'Enough, poet, enough.' Villon again heard amusement in the stranger's voice. 'Your over-honeyed words are wasted on

me. I had nothing to do with your fall from favour. It seems your past has caught up with you.'

'My past, lord?' Despite his innocent tone, Villon's guts had suddenly started to churn. 'By my troth I don't...'

'Keep your troth to yourself and stop treating me like the kind of preening idiot who gives a good damn about how others think of them.' What sounded like genuine anger had replaced the amusement in the stranger's voice. 'Does the name von Klatch mean anything to you?'

'Von... Klatch.' Villon's stomach had stopped churning and had begun a tumbling free-fall.

'Madame von Klatch, it seems, has several brothers,' the stranger continued. 'One of whom attended the Graf's soiree. His family name, and that of Madame von Klatch before she married, is Liebermann. The name Villon was well known to him before he came to Wallenholt.'

'Herr Liebermann has told the Graf much that he was unaware of regarding your past. He was surprised to learn that you have a reputation as an accomplished thief. However, when you begin your journey back to Marienburg tomorrow, you will be going to answer for the insult you paid Madame von Klatch. The Graf von Wallenholt knows better than to cross one of the Merchant Princes of Marienburg.'

'This... This Herr Liebermann is mistaken,' Villon stuttered. 'He has mistaken my name for that of the thief of which you speak. Perhaps he is called Villain, or Vilette, or—'

'I do hope not,' the stranger interrupted. 'If that were the case, I would have no reason to help you escape.'



AFTER AN unguessable amount of time in the dark, they came for him, manacled his wrists and ankles and led him up into the dawn.

A donkey cart was waiting for them in the stable yard. They all but threw Villon aboard and clucked the donkey into rattling motion through the still-quiet streets. Villon was left to roll painfully about in the bottom of the cart, receiving a kick every time he rolled too close to the feet of one of the constables that had climbed aboard after him. It was, unfortunately, a very small cart.

The slow-running Kleinereik fed into the Reik several leagues to the west and served as Wallenholt's main trading route to the Empire. But the boat moored at Jetty Number Four, a river cutter that was flying a crest Villon assumed to belong to the Liebermann family, had more to do with politics than trade; it was going to take Villon back to Marienburg.

Villon was able to swing his feet under him as he was rolled off the cart and, with the aid of an inelegant stumble-and-shuffle, he managed to stay upright. However, the over-zealous prod in the back he received from the chief constable's short club almost pitched him into the dirt. With a constable keeping pace on either side, he shuffled towards the jetty.

Looking about him, he saw that the quayside was not much busier than the rest of the town at this early hour. Another cutter had finished loading and its crew were in the process of casting off; another, two jetties along, was still being loaded. The door of the Rudderless Cutter, the tavern that catered night and day to dock workers and rivermen, stood open, though the lack of noise from within suggested that business was slow this morning.

'It'll be a long time before you see the inside of a tavern again,' the chief constable snarled in Villon's ear, then prodded him again with his club. 'Get a move on. Your carriage awaits.'

Villon continued to glance up and down the wharveside as he shuffled along the short wooden jetty. At least he didn't have to invent some pretext for slowing his progress towards the cutter. He wanted to give the stranger – what had the Graf called him? Magister? – as much time as possible to make good on his promise.

But, when his foot touched the lip of the gangplank that angled between the jetty and the cutter, Villon had to admit the possibility that the Magister had reconsidered his plan.

'Curse you, man! I'll not have anyone say that about my sister, even in jest!'

'Get back, you blackguard, or I'll do to you what I did to her – but you won't enjoy as much as she!'

'That's it! You're going to eat those words!'

The sounds of an argument exploded into the still air. There was the sound of heavy footsteps on wood. Villon, one foot on the gangplank, craned to look over his shoulder.

There were five of them, rivermen judging by their clothing. A couple of them still held flagons in their fists, though Villon had the impression that they had come from the opposite direction to the Rudderless Cutter.

They were already on the jetty. The last of them to speak shoved another in the chest, forcing him to stumble backwards towards Villon and his escort. The aggressor chased after him; the others crowded onto the jetty behind him.

'You men, stop that!' the chief constable stepped away from Villon and pointed at the men with his club. 'By order of the Graf, go home and sleep off whatever idiocy it is that you're arguing about!'

'You calling me an idiot?' The riverman who had been pushed backwards along the jetty had regained his balance and turned to face the chief constable. Villon noted that he held a flagon down by his hip.

It didn't stay there for long. The crack of its impact on the chief constable's skull was as loud as a musket's report. The chief constable staggered, came close to stepping off the jetty's edge, but recovered. Clearly the metal skull cap helmet that was regulation wear for the constables of Wallenholt had absorbed a good deal of the blow.

The chief constable's attacker stared for a heartbeat at the dented drinking vessel before hurling it aside. The constables were pounding towards him; his

companions were racing to meet them. Villon didn't envy him his position at the meeting point of the two opposing forces...

The riverman dived at the constables' feet, clearly hoping to trip them. Ready for him, they leapt over his sprawling body and continued their forward rush. Rolling to his feet, he looked around for another target. Unfortunately for him, his first target found him.

Stepping close behind the riverman, the chief constable hooked his club under his chin and levered backwards. To avoid strangulation, the riverman managed to half-turn towards his assailant and they grappled, staggering back and forth across the width of the jetty, each trying and failing to hurl the other into the river.

Behind Villon, the cutter's crew looked on, unsure of whether or not their duties included going to the constables' aid. Villon imagined that, if their sympathies lay anywhere, it would be with their fellow rivermen. Past the struggling figures of the chief constable and his attacker, one of the chasing group had already been launched into the river, courtesy of a well-timed blow from one of the constables, but the remaining two were meeting every one of the constables' blows with one or more of their own.

As yet, none of cutter's crew had thought to complete Villon's transfer to their vessel and Villon wanted to be far from the wharf before the thought occurred to them. The manacles made swimming impossible. There was only one way off the jetty: past both sets of combatants.

Nervously, Villon shuffled away from the gangplank. Ahead of him, the chief constable seemed to be getting the upper hand. He paused, hoping to spot a chance to ease past them unnoticed.

'You! Stay!' the chief constable had succeeded in applying a head-lock to his opponent that looked at least halfway secure. Both hands occupied, he was relying upon the authority in his voice and the threat in his eyes to root Villon to the spot. Not about to be frozen like a frightened rabbit, Villon took another manaced step towards the wharf's end of the jetty.

'I said *stay!*' The chief constable shot a clawed hand at Villon, who jumped backwards more vigorously than the manacles were designed to allow. Suddenly, he was falling, feet tangled in the manacles' chains, hands clutching at air.

The river folded itself around him, pushing foul-tasting water up his nose and down his throat. Eyes still open, the world suddenly lost focus and took on a greenish tinge.

Arms and legs pumping as best they could, he somehow broke the surface long enough to gulp down barely half a lungful of air. Then the weight of the manacles dragged him back under. As he kicked and clawed at the water around him, desperate to regain the surface, he had the dim sense of a sluggish current carrying him away from the jetty.

Grey mist edged his vision as he redoubled his spastic, frog-like swimming stroke. This time, he managed to take a whole shuddering breath before the manacles' dragging mass reclaimed him for the river.



HE HAD NO idea how long he had been unconscious. He woke to the sensation of being lifted clear of the river's dank embrace. Was he being carried to stand before Morr's dark throne and be judged? He struggled to breathe, then coughed and what felt like a barrel's worth of river water jetted from his throat. Somehow he didn't imagine that his final journey would feel like this.

'Alive then.' Now he was flat on his back in some kind of rivercraft. Cracking his eyelids he could see the sides of the wooden hull rising over him. Something was hanging over him, he noticed. Fixing his bleary gaze upon it, he made out a face: pale eyes; black beard, neatly trimmed.

The stranger moved away from Villon, who struggled into a half-supine position. He seemed to be in a smaller craft than the trading vessel moored at the jetties:

narrow, shallow and fitted with a single sail, which the stranger was in the process of trimming, though there didn't seem to be much point in raising a sail on a windless morning like this.

Raising his head above the gunwales, Villon was surprised to feel that a wind had indeed sprung up and was filling the small sail. He also realised that, rather than heading downriver with the current, the stranger was steering the craft back towards Wallenholt. Hauling himself into an unsteady position somewhere between kneeling and crouching, he stared ahead: there was Wallenholt; there was the ship that was to return him to Marienburg; and there were the constables, standing on the jetty, waving as if they expected the stranger to steer his boat towards them. There was no sign of the argumentative group who, deliberately or otherwise, had facilitated his escape.

'Master!' he rasped out through a throat made rank by river water.

'Magister,' the stranger corrected, without turning his head. He seemed to be looking for something further upriver, past Wallenholt.

'Magister,' Villon added. The stranger seemed to be very particular about titles and Villon saw no profit in antagonising him. 'While I am in your debt for rescuing me from the river, I confess I am surprised to find us returning to Wallenholt. Given our conversation in the cells, I had formed the understanding that you wanted to help me escape.'

'We're not returning to Wallenholt. Our path lies in this direction.' The Magister pointed upstream. Wisps of river mist clung to the banks further upstream.

'But the constables...' The boat was close enough for the shouts of the frustrated law officers to reach it. Villon saw that the chief constable was engaged in animated discussion with a man Villon took to be the captain of the river cutter. The chief constable jabbed a finger at the craft in which Villon sat, feeling particularly vulnerable. The captain thought for a moment, then nodded.

'They're coming after us!' The cutter's captain was barking orders to his crew, orders which were answered at a run by

his crew. On the jetty, the constables began to unfasten the cutter's mooring ropes. 'They'll run us down!'

'Not if they cannot find us,' the Magister answered calmly. He pointed upstream. 'It seems the river mist is especially persistent this morning.'

'What?' Villon couldn't understand why the Magister should give a damn about the weather – until he looked past the low prow of the boat and saw that what had, only moments earlier, appeared to be faint wisps of mist had thickened and grown into a bank of dense white opacity that stretched from bank to bank. Nor was it simply sitting there. It was moving downriver towards them.

The Magister's craft had passed the Wallenholt Wharf. As it left the town behind, it seemed to be picking up speed, as if the wind that filled its sail was growing stronger. But, if the wind was blowing upstream, Villon realised, what was propelling the bank of mist downstream?

Villon had no time to ponder this further. The combined speeds of the Magister's boat and the mist brought the two together more quickly than might be considered entirely natural and Villon's world turned white.



IN CENTURIES past, the Kleinereik was known for the peculiarity of its weather.' The Magister handed Villon a key and nodded at his manacles.

'Really.' Villon got the impression that his rescuer didn't really care whether or not he believed him. He got on with fitting the key to the thick metal cuffs that bound his wrists and ankles. They hit the soft, slightly boggy soil of the river bank with a muffled clank. The grey mare that had been waiting, tethered, on the bank – the opposite bank to that on which Wallenholt stood, at least a day's ride downstream – shifted its weight and whinnied softly at the sudden noise. Villon offered the key to the Magister, who took it – then tossed it into the river.

‘Do likewise with the chains,’ he instructed Villon. ‘I prefer to leave no trace.’

By the time Villon had gathered up the manacles and propelled them as far away from the bank as possible, given their weight and awkwardness, the Magister had reached into the boat and lifted out a set of saddle bags. He handed the bags to Villon.

‘In there you will find a map, some provisions and a small purse,’ the Magister said without preamble. ‘The map will guide you through the Reikwald Forest to a backwoods town which, I am informed, has become the base of operations of one Gerhard Kraus. Kraus is a bandit, nothing more, though he has ambitions towards respectability.’ He broke off to snort derisively.

‘I commissioned Kraus to acquire a certain... artefact,’ the Magister continued. ‘This he did, but subsequently reneged on our agreement, preferring to keep it for himself. In return for your liberation, you shall acquire that artefact from Kraus and deliver it to me.’ The Magister had turned his pale gaze on Villon. It was clear that he did not expect Villon to object.

‘What is it that you want me to acquire?’ Villon asked.

‘Oh, you will know it when you see it,’ the Magister replied. ‘It has a certain quality that you are sure to recognise, given your poetic sensibility’. It was impossible to miss the weight of mockery the Magister loaded upon the word ‘poetic’. ‘Kraus is a vain man who enjoys the flattery of poets. That and your talents as a thief shall be his undoing.’

The Magister turned and stepped into the boat, unhitched its mooring rope from the overhanging branch to which he had tethered it and pushed away from the bank. As the boat began to drift downstream, this time obeying the river’s natural current, he looked up at Villon.

‘I shall travel to Altdorf and stay there for the next seven days,’ he said. ‘You will find me at The Broken Bough, on Karl-Ludwigplatz. Do not disappoint me. Do not try to run. I will find you.’

‘I believe you,’ Villon replied – but the Magister had already turned to set his sail. That done, he settled into the stern of the

boat, hand on the tiller. He didn’t look back and was soon lost to sight around the first bend.



VILLON HAD heard his destination before he saw it: the sound of hammers, saws and shouted instructions.

A wall of stakes, taller than two men, was being erected around the town. A closer look at the labour force over the next couple of days would show that the townsfolk were building the walls of their own prison, supervised by the bandits who had taken possession of their home.

‘Welcome to Krausberg,’ The taller of the two gatekeepers growled. Like his fellow, this man was heavily armed, heavily bearded and just plain heavy. He held out an open palm and growled again: this time informing Villon how much it would cost to enter the town.

Villon paid the toll and was allowed to enter. He knew little about military matters, but the fortifications looked sturdy enough – though, he noticed the wall of stakes had yet to completely encircle the town. He made a mental note of the locations of the open sections, then made enquiries about the availability of a room for a weary traveller.

With surprising shrewdness, Kraus had barracked his men in the homes of the townsfolk and left the town’s two lodging houses and its single inn open to accept paying guests. After visiting both guest houses, thus providing himself with an excuse for wandering through the streets, setting in his mind the locations of the gaps in the wall, he took the cheaper of the two rooms available at the inn.



IT WAS something Villon had done hundreds of times before: pretend to become the friend and drinking

partner of someone he fully intended to fleece. The only difference this time was that he was pretending to become the friend and drinking partner of somewhere between fifty and seventy men simultaneously, in the hope that his hurriedly-assembled reputation would reach the ears of Gerhard Kraus.

In the three days that had passed since his arrival in Krausberg, the man after whom the town had been re-named had not left the confines of what used to be the mayor's house at the far end of the main street. Direct questions regarding Kraus had met with hostile, suspicious glares, so Villon had concentrated on entertaining his new friends with verses that had proved popular in the stews and taverns of Marienburg. Ironically, 'Madame Klatch's Menagerie' proved to be the most popular of all.



KLATCH! Klatch! Villon wasn't sure what the time was, but he was pretty certain that he had already recited that particular verse once already this evening. His audience, however, had decided what it wanted to hear.

Holding up his hand for quiet, Villon prepared himself. Sweeping his flagon from the bar, he took a long draught, making sure to spill most of it down his shirt front in the process. Had he swallowed a fraction of what he appeared to have drunk, he would have been insensible hours ago. Placing the empty vessel on the bar, he took a breath.

'I rhyme of the lady, von Klatch...'

'Not again, poet!' At the sound of this voice – one Villon did not recognise – all eyes turned to a corner, a short way from the door. A heavy-set, red bearded man stood there. Where the bandits wore the rough fabric and oiled leather harnesses of professional cut-throats, he wore velvet and linen which would have been more suited to a merchant's salon. The mere fact that he would dare to wear such clothes in

the company of the inn's other patrons left Villon in no doubt that this was the man he had been sent to find: Gerhard Kraus.

'Bawdyhouse rhymes are all very well,' Kraus declared, 'and you have some facility with them, as I have been told.'

'Thank you, my lord.' Villon bowed. He didn't imagine that Kraus would be too pleased to see the mocking smile that cracked his face. 'Some facility' indeed! This from a man who was better acquainted with the pleas of his victims and the screams of the dying than with meter, scansion and rhyme!

'But there are forms of verse capable of stimulating Man's higher functions, rather than merely pandering to his baser tastes,' Kraus continued. Villon thought he was going to laugh out loud at the bandit's slab-tongued attempt at literary critique.

With an absurdly foppish flourish Kraus produced from a pocket of his tunic a small book. It almost vanished in his ham-like grasp as he brandished it before the crowd. 'Perhaps you would care to hear one of my most recent efforts?'

'I'd be honoured, lord,' was all Villon trusted himself to say; the urge to laugh in the bandit's face was almost too great.

That urge died the moment Kraus began to read.

The subject matter – an episode from the youth of Sigmar – was traditional, unsurprising; but the seven-footed meter in which it had been composed, as well as being much older than the Heroic hexameter, was used with a flexibility that one in a hundred poets might hope to achieve after a lifetime's practice.

This alone left Villon in no doubt: whoever had composed this poem, it was not Gerhard Kraus.

And the effect the poem had on its audience made Villon doubt the unknown poet's humanity.

Every drunken thug in the place had turned his attention to the verse; they leaned forward, anxious to catch the next word, the next line, as if they were collegium-trained aesthetes in a Marienburg salon, not bandit scum, drunk out of their minds in the middle of nowhere.

And though he couldn't have described it in words, Villon knew why.

It was there, in the back of his mind: a tingling, like an inaccessible itch. Not a voice. Something softer, more insidious, something that made it impossible to turn away. Villon felt as if he had gone without water for days and the words that fell from Kraus's lips were droplets from a mountain spring. A quick shake of the head cleared his mind long enough for him to take in the rapt expressions of those around him. Looking towards the back of the room, Villon saw the effect it was having on Kraus.

He could have been a different person. Though physically unchanged, everything about him was different: his posture, his expression and, most of all, his voice. Kraus's rough bass had become a delicate, flexible instrument, capable of octave-wide leaps and swoops. The verse sang through it, through Kraus's entire being.

'You will know it when you see it...'
Villon remembered the voice from somewhere. It had sent him here to find something. He struggled to recall the vague outlines of a face – a beard? – but the name eluded him. Had he been asked his own name, he realised, he would be hard put to provide an answer.

He was being drawn back, drawn back into the verse, whose words filled the tavern, filled the minds of everyone present...



THE SILENCE was deafening. Villon had no idea how long it had lasted, or how long it had taken him to realise that it was over. Looking around, he saw several of the tavern customers were shaking their heads and blinking stupidly, as if emerging from a deep sleep. At the back of the room Kraus hung between two of his bodyguards like a limp puppet; the power and elegance that had possessed him while reading was gone. He jerked his head drunkenly towards the door and was half-carried, half-dragged out into the night.

Villon waited as long as he dared then moved across the tavern and cracked open the door. The retreating silhouettes of Kraus and his bodyguard were already halfway down the street. Easing the door open further, Villon slipped after them.



AS FAR AS Villon had been able to ascertain during his evenings at the inn, the town's original inhabitants were not under curfew. Evidently, the back-breaking work on the fortifications and the type of person one was likely to meet of an evening in Krausberg were enough to keep them indoors after sunset. The main street was empty as Villon made his way through the shadows towards the former mayor's dwelling. He hung back in the lee of a barber-surgeon's shop until they had bundled Kraus inside, then made his way cautiously around the house, looking for a way in.

A small outbuilding leaned against the rear wall of the house. A running jump gained Villon a finger-hold on the edge of the roof and he hauled himself up. The roof inclined towards a narrow window; Villon edged towards it, wary of the roof's stability. Overconfidence – usually as the result of over-indulgence – had delivered him into the hands of the local law or more than one occasion. Should that happen tonight, he doubted that he would be lucky enough to spend any time in a cell.

Upon reaching the window, he drew a short, thick-bladed knife that had been among the articles he found in the Magister's saddlebags. A few minutes work with it between the rough-fitting window at its frame and he was able to flip the catch and slip silently inside.

He found himself in an unlit corridor, where he paused to take in the sounds of the house. Muffled conversation reached him from one end of the corridor; he edged towards it, careful to keep to the middle of the passage and thus avoid banging into furniture or ornaments. A

corner revealed the house's main staircase. Dim light reached the landing from below, as did the voices; they faded as he listened – probably the bodyguards heading for the kitchen.

A table stood at the head of the stairs. A lit candle in an ornate wooden candelabrum stood on the table. Villon took it with him as he padded softly down the corridor that lead away from the staircase at an acute angle.

The first door was unlocked – a linen cupboard. The second was locked, but the latch was not the work of a craftsman. A few seconds' work with the knife and the latch gave. After a glance back down the corridor, Villon cupped his hand around the candle flame and stepped inside.



ONE LOOK AT the figure sprawled across the bed told Villon that he didn't need to worry about the candle light waking the room's occupant. Kraus might have been dead drunk but Villon hadn't seen him take a drop. His performance at the inn had robbed him of all but the strength required to maintain the shallow breathing that barely lifted his over-fussy shirt front.

And there, under one out-thrown arm, was the book.

Tucking his knife back into his boot, Villon reached out and prepared to gently ease it free.

Nothing could have prepared him for the shock of touching the book. It felt as if he had placed his hand into a bucket of freezing water. The chill ran quickly up his arm, hitting his chest with enough force to make him gasp involuntarily, then seemed to dissipate, leaving Villon at first shivering then sweating profusely.

Villon glanced at Kraus. The bandit hadn't so much as twitched at the sound of Villon's gasp. Villon took a breath, then eased the book from under Kraus's arm. Again, the bandit didn't move. Villon stepped away from the bed and stared

down at the slim volume's plain calfskin cover.

Had it been real – the racing chill he felt when his fingers touched the soft brown cover? It was just a book, probably a privately-printed volume of the kind von Wallenholt had planned for Villon's verse. And the Magister was just a collector of such volumes with too much money to spare and a sideline in parlour magic.

But Villon knew this was untrue. What had happened in the tavern was not natural. The chill that shot up his arm had been real. And there was something else about this book: it felt heavier than it should for a volume this slim, as if something had found a way to slip between the words, conceal itself among the fibres of the parchment pages, but could not prevent its weight giving away its presence.

The Broken Bough, Altdorf. He should already be on his way, not standing here staring at the book he had agreed to steal. He should be heading for the door, then padding down the corridor, past the stairs and on to the window over the outbuilding.

But he remembered what had happened in the tavern. The audience had been unable to turn away. Even he had been sucked into its world. What kind of verse could do such a thing?

He didn't remember putting the candle down on the table beside the bed. His hands might have been moving under their own volition as, with something approaching reverence, they opened the book.

Words. Page after page of marks in faded ink on slightly yellow parchment. Words that Villon could not read.

Villon sucked in a deep breath, surprised to find that his chest felt as if it had been squeezed tight since he had first touched the book. Something had withdrawn from him, leaving only a vague sense of disappointment floating on the air.

He shook his head, closed the book. Definitely time to go.

The sound of creaking bed boards and rustling fabric told him that he had waited too long already. There came the smooth rasp of a sword leaving its scabbard and Villon threw himself away from the bed – a heartbeat before the heavy cavalry sabre cleaved the air where he had stood.

Villon landed and rolled into a half-crouch in the middle of the room – and cursed his luck for not taking him closer to the door. Kraus was off the bed and standing between Villon and the door. At least, it looked like Kraus...

The bandit seemed to sway as he stood there, like a puppet held too slackly on its strings. The sword, which he had drawn from a scabbard propped against the other side of the bed, hung in a loose, almost careless grasp. His head lolled unpleasantly and, in the flickering of the candle, Villon saw that his eyes, though open, had rolled back in their sockets. The candlelight played across the exposed whites.

Villon backed away from Kraus, mind racing, eyes flicking about the room, seeking a way out. Slack-mouthed, Kraus stared after him, the tilt of his head giving him an air of detached curiosity, as if he were an astrologist studying the movement of the heavens. Villon began to entertain the hope that he might be able to step gingerly past the immobile imbecile and slip out the way he had come.

Then he heard it, rising in volume: a reedy ululation, that seemed to come from Kraus's mouth without any effort on his part. It echoed from him as if from the distant recesses of a mountain cave – a mountain cave in a very cold part of the world.

Villon had heard it before – as an undertone to the verse Kraus had performed in the tavern. Villon felt again a rising chill in his bones. Without the poetry to sweeten it, the sound was repulsive, but this did nothing to dilute its effect: as he had been drawn into the world of the verse, Villon felt himself being drawn into the world from which the sound emanated. Somewhere cold and dark.

Instinct saved him again. Some animal part of his brain knew that, after rooting his prey to the spot, Kraus would strike. It was only a stiff-legged stumble, but it took him backwards and out of the range of the descending sword. The sound of the heavy blade biting into the floorboards jolted Villon back to proper wakefulness.

After jerking the sword free of the floorboards, Kraus came for him again. Villon had snatched up a chair and used it to fend off the attack.

Kraus hacked at the chair, severing one of the legs – whatever power motivated him had endowed him with strength beyond the human. He might well carve his way through the chair even before Villon tired of holding it.

'Boss!' the shout from the other side of the door was accompanied by the sound of running footsteps. 'Boss! You all right in there?' Whoever was in the corridor didn't wait long for a reply. There was a loud thump. Luckily, the catch which Villon had refastened after entering the room held. But it would not hold for long. Still backing away from Kraus, and now holding a two-legged, one-armed chair, Villon, risked a glance behind him, judged the distance between himself and the chamber's heavy, diamond-lead windows.

Kraus drew back his sword-arm, ready for another hacking strike and Villon hurled the remains of the chair at him. The impact would have knocked a normal man to his knees. Kraus took two steps back, then came forward again.

Villon still did not dare turn and work at the window latches. He had already pulled his knife from his boot for the purpose, but, as Kraus charged towards him, he knew he'd have to use something else to open the windows.

Kraus swung for Villon with all the force he would have used against the chair. Villon ducked beneath the neck-level swing of the blade, then rose and slammed the knife into the bandit's right eye. For the first time since he woke, Kraus uttered a human sound – a low grunt of pain – as his sword fell from his suddenly nerveless grasp and he keeled over, landing heavily on the floor.

At this, the shouts and thumps from the other side of the door increased in volume and frequency. The door creaked, began to give way.

Leaving his knife in Kraus's socket, Villon once again hefted the chair. This was no time for subtlety, or for struggling to free his knife, should it have wedged itself into Kraus's skull.

The window exploded into fragments of lead and glass as the chair flew through it. Villon was halfway through the resulting gap when he heard movement and something approaching a groan. He looked back into the room.

Kraus was halfway to his feet. With one hand he scabbled after his sword. With the other – his right – he reached up to his face.



I'D NOT HAVE believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes.' Villon paused to smile ruefully at the unintentional pun. 'He – Kraus, whatever it was – just pulled the knife free as if it were a splinter in his thumb.' He took a long swallow of the wine the Magister had ordered before ushering him into a small private room at the rear of The Broken Bough.

Villon wiped his lips and continued: 'The door gave in at that moment and I decided it would be much to my advantage if I was elsewhere. I had to drop to the bare ground, but it's not the first time I've done such a thing – I know how to land to avoid sprains or breaks.

'On my way to the livery stables, I stopped off at the tavern to raise the alarm and sent Kraus's men to the mayor's house to defend their leader from a monster with one eye. It was all nonsense but, fortunately, those in the tavern were very, very drunk.'

'You got away unseen.' The Magister had barely touched his own goblet. The well-banked fire that burned in the grate seemed to have no effect upon him, while Villon was beginning to sweat.

'Yes. The livery was close by the gate, but the guards had answered the general hue and cry. And anyway, I doubled back along the inside of the fortifications until I came to a gap. Kraus's men will have assumed I took the track from the gate. Thanks to your map, I was able to follow a less obvious route. I didn't want to risk missing you, so I rode as hard as I could for Altdorf. I took a room and stabled my – I mean your – horse and came straight here.' Villon decided not to mention his brief visit to the collegium library en route to the tavern.

'And the artefact?'

'You mean this?' Villon withdrew it from his tunic and placed it on the table between them. 'It seems a strange thing to risk one's life for.'

'Many have lost more than their lives due to its malign influence,' The Magister replied. He picked up the book and flung it into the fire. Villon leapt up, reaching involuntarily towards the flames.

'Leave it!' The Magister commanded. In the grate, the fire had already begun to consume the book's old, dry pages.

'You will already be aware that it was no ordinary book of verse.' The Magister seemed to be enjoying Villon's surprise as he took his seat again. 'It is the last surviving copy of the work of a damned poet – his name is of no matter, since it belongs in the lists of those lost to the darker powers. Some say he was a sorcerer, others that he was possessed, a mere conduit through whose verse those unseen powers sought to render other men susceptible to corruption, possession and eventual damnation. From what you say, they had already seized control of Kraus's soul and was beginning to twist the minds of his men. You will have felt something of its power when he read from the book.

'Kraus fell victim so quickly after acquiring the book for me because he could read. The power behind the verse could reach out to him directly from the page.' The Magister smiled. 'Who would have predicted that of a wandering cut-throat?'

'That's why you were so interested in me at the Graf's reception,' Villon interjected. For the first time, he had the sense that he understood at least part of the Magister's actions. 'Because I cannot read.'

'Your ignorance was to you as armour is to a warrior on the battlefield,' the Magister smiled again. 'Why else would I bother to save you from trial in Marienburg? I have no time for poetry and no use for poets.' He dropped a heavy purse onto the table, motioned to Villon to take it.

'Thieves, however, always have their uses.'



THIEVES, however, always have their uses! Villon parroted the Magister's final words to him as he strolled back towards his lodgings – a tavern tucked under the city walls. He felt the weight of the purse inside his tunic, next to the slim calfskin volume that had nestled there since his arrival in Altdorf. He had slipped the book stolen from the collegium next to it before making his way to The Broken Bough, where the Magister had helpfully disposed of the evidence of the theft.

The Magister had never seen the book he had gone to such lengths to acquire, therefore he'd not know if the volume Villon handed him was the right one. Villon could hand him any book of verse and receive his reward. Enchanted or not, there were bound to be others willing to pay handsomely for the volume he had, after all, risked his life to acquire.

Why get paid once, when you could get paid twice – or, if you played your hand well, more than twice?

Why indeed? Villon chuckled to himself. Why indeed?



HE DIDN'T hear them coming. Admittedly, he had been drinking non-stop for close to a week by the time the City Guard broke down the door of his room at The Well-Paid Wanton. His companion had been handed her clothes and sent packing and he had been dragged naked through the streets to the nearest holding cell. No doubt the landlord would take the remainder of the Magister's money to pay for a new door.

'It would seem that the good burghers of Marienburg will have their satisfaction after all.' As he had sat on the cell's damp flagstones, with only a length of lice-riddled sack cloth for warmth, Villon had been waiting to hear that voice.

'How did you find me?' he asked the Magister, who stood on the other side of the barred cell door. 'How did you know?'

'How did I know?' The Magister addressed Villon's second question first. 'Most of my life has been spent working to protect the Empire from the encroachments of the Outer Dark. I sometimes work alone, I sometimes employ agents such as yourself. It is a loose, collegiate organisation. An invisible college, you might say. During that time, I have developed something of an instinct for the truth of a situation. On reflection, I did not feel that about our last meeting.

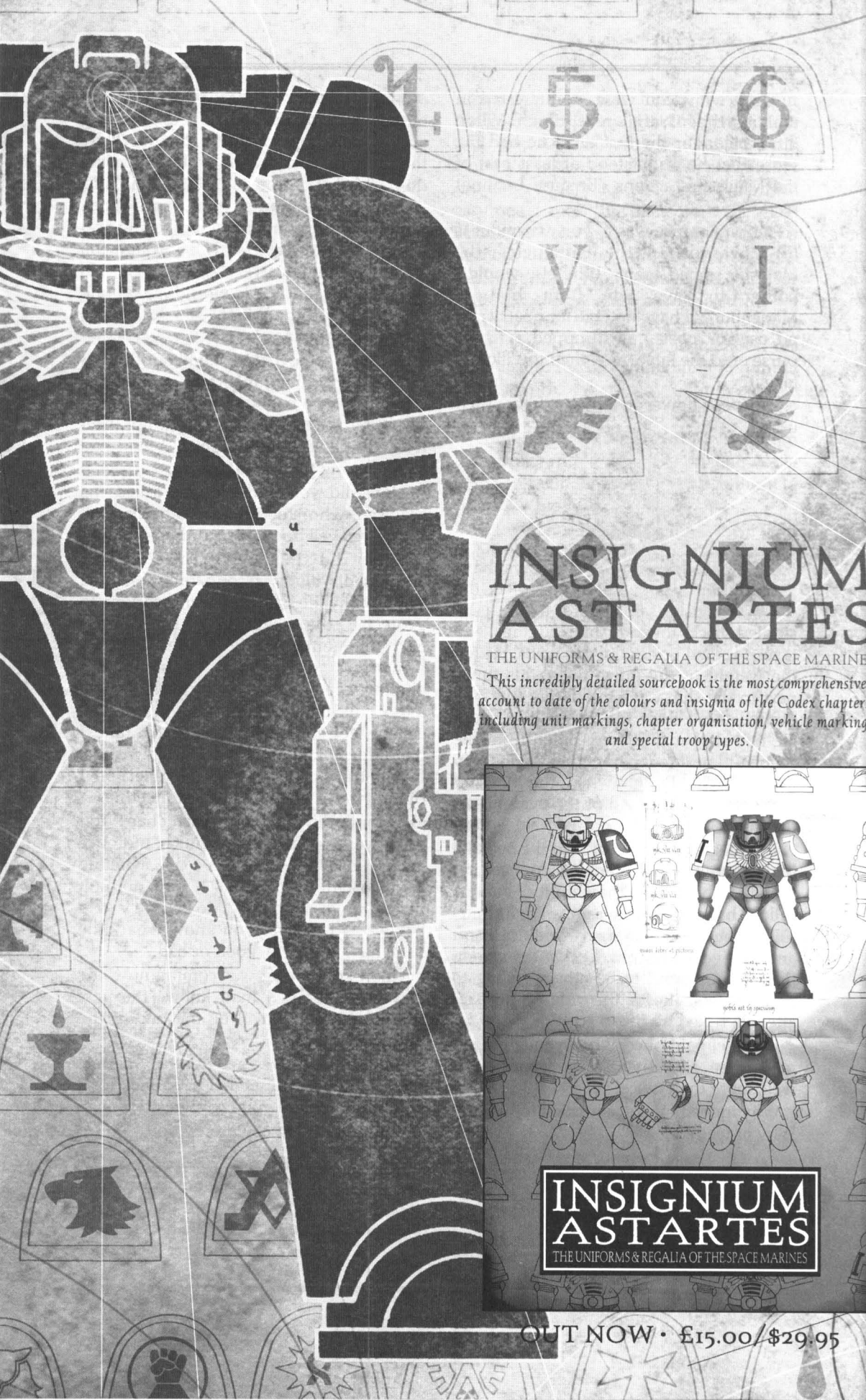
'As for finding you, that wasn't hard. You enjoy your reputation too much and once again it has landed you in a cell, awaiting transportation for trial. If my opinion means anything to you, I do believe you to be a good poet, but you know what little use I have for them, good or bad.'

Villon knew what was coming next, the way a condemned man knows the next thing he will feel will be the bite of the executioner's axe.

'Thieves, however are another matter,' The Magister continued. 'I have a job for a good thief. Would you be interested?'

Defeated, Villon could only nod. ♪

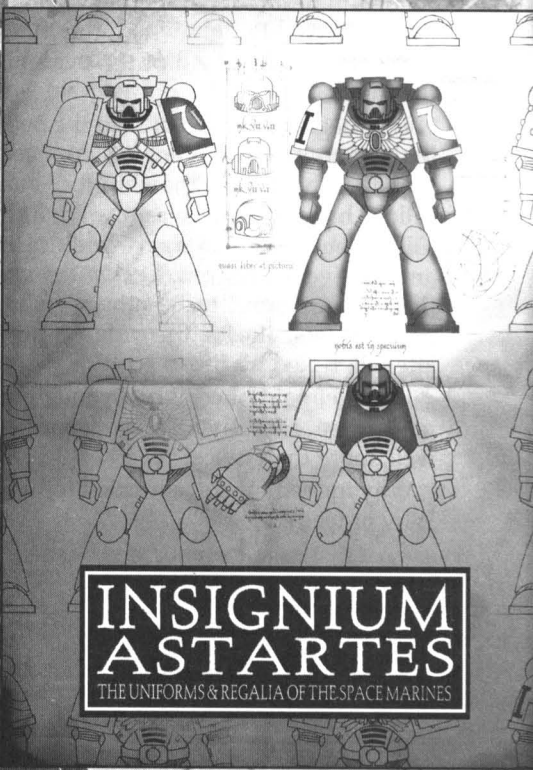




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TALES FROM THE TEN-TAILED CAT



WHILE SOME JUST COME TO CATCH UP WITH OLD FRIENDS.

GRIMMSON? OLD GRUMMUND GRIMMSON?

WELL, IF IT ISN'T THE TREASURE HUNTER.

HAVEN'T SEEN YOU IN HERE FOR A WHILE, MADE YOUR FORTUNE YET?

NOT YET, MANLING. SO HOW ARE YOU, YOU FILTHY BUNCH OF GROBI-LOVERS?

STILL SERVING THE SAME OLD WATERED-DOWN Grog IN HERE?

NOW LOOK HERE! THERE'S NOTHING WRONG WITH THE ALE HERE. IF YOU DON'T LIKE IT YOU CAN GO BACK TO THAT WORTHLESS, STINKING MINE OF YOURS.

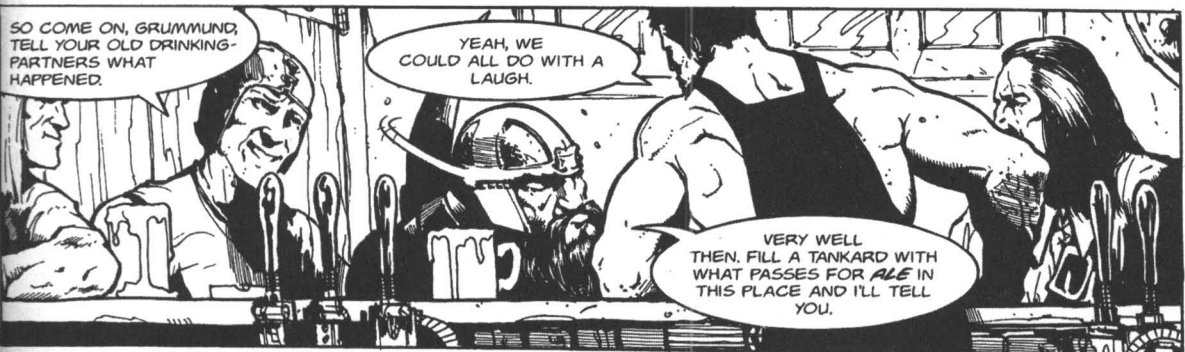


YEAH, WHAT HAPPENED ABOUT THAT?

HOW LONG AGO WAS IT YOU WON THE STAKE OFF THAT OTHER DRUNK DWARF?

OVER FOUR MONTHS-

WHAT DO YOU MEAN 'OTHER DRUNK DWARF'?



SO COME ON, GRUMMUND, TELL YOUR OLD DRINKING-PARTNERS WHAT HAPPENED.

YEAH, WE COULD ALL DO WITH A LAUGH.

VERY WELL THEN, FILL A TANKARD WITH WHAT PASSES FOR ALE IN THIS PLACE AND I'LL TELL YOU.

The Miner's Tale

SCRIPT: JONATHAN GREEN • ART: ROMAN SYDOR
LETTERS: FIONA STEPHENSON

' I ALWAYS THOUGHT AKRUT WAS JUST A **BAD LOSER**, ALL THAT TALK ABOUT THE CLAIM BEING **DEAD**, HAVING RUN OUT OF GOLD **YEARS AGO**. HE CERTAINLY DIDN'T SEEM THAT BOTHERED ABOUT HAVING LOST HIS MINE TO ME IN A **GAME OF CHANCE**.



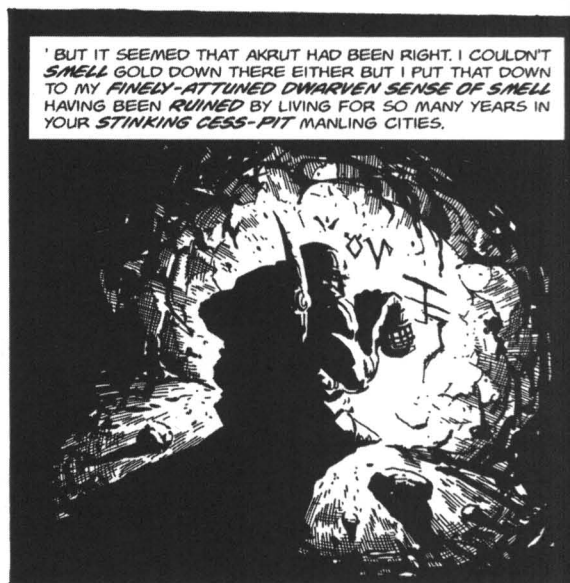
' BUT I HAD NOTHING TO LOSE BY CHECKING IT OUT FOR MYSELF. SO IT WAS THAT I MADE MY WAY **NORTH**, INTO THE FOOTHILLS OF THE **MIDDLE MOUNTAINS**, AND THAT IS WHERE MY **STRANGE TALE** REALLY BEGINS.



' THE STATE I FOUND THE WORKINGS IN WAS A **DISGRACE**. NO SELF-RESPECTING DWARF SHOULD HAVE LEFT HIS MINE IN SUCH A POOR STATE OF REPAIR, EVEN IF ALL THE GOLD HAD GONE. THERE WAS **GRINT** AND SPOIL ALL OVER THE PLACE.



' BUT IT SEEMED THAT AKRUT HAD BEEN RIGHT. I COULDN'T **SMELL** GOLD DOWN THERE EITHER BUT I PUT THAT DOWN TO MY **FINELY-ATTUNED DWARVEN SENSE OF SMELL** HAVING BEEN **RUINED** BY LIVING FOR SO MANY YEARS IN YOUR **STINKING CESS-PIT** MANLING CITIES.



' THEN, AT THE BOTTOM OF THE **DEEPEST SHAFT** IN THE MINE, I DISCOVERED A LARGE, **BLOCKED TUNNEL**.

IT COULD HAVE BEEN CAUSED BY A **NATURAL CAVE-IN** BUT I COULDN'T HELP THINKING THAT IT WAS ALMOST AS IF SOMEONE HAD **BLOCKED THE TUNNEL ON PURPOSE**.



' INTRIGUED, AND WITH THE REST OF THE DERELICT MINE A **DEAD LOSS**, I PREPARED TO CLEAR THE ROCKFALL AND SEE WHAT LAY **BEYOND**.

' FORTUNATELY AKRUT HAD LEFT BEHIND A NUMBER OF BARRELS OF **BLACKPOWDER**, WHICH WOULD MAKE THE TASK A LOT EASIER TO COMPLETE.



BUT AS I WAS ABOUT TO IGNITE THE BLACKPOWDER I BECAME AWARE OF A DISTANT RUMBLING.



THE NOISE GREW LOUDER AS ITS SOURCE CAME CLOSER AND CLOSER UNTIL I COULD FEEL THE VIBRATIONS DEEP IN MY BONES, MY TEETH RATTLING IN MY SKULL!

I BEGAN TO SUSPECT AN EARTHQUAKE!

DRRRRR!
WHRRRRR!!



RUMBLE! RUMBLE! RUMBLE! RUMBLE! RUMBLE!!



WHRRR!!

DRRRRR!

FZZZZ!!

BUT IT WAS, IN FACT, SOMETHING ALTOGETHER MORE STRANGE AND TERRIFYING!

CRUNCH!



KACHUNK!

KACHUNK!

GRUNGI'S BEARD!

SFFZZZZ!

ZZRRRR!

AS SOON AS THE MONSTROUS MACHINE HAD APPEARED IT WAS GONE AGAIN, CHEWING ITS WAY THROUGH THE ROCK AND EARTH LIKE SOME GIANT MASSOT.





'IT SEEMED TO ME THAT THE EXPLOSION BROUGHT DOWN MOST OF THE MINE - ON TOP OF ME!

AAAHHHH!

KER-RASH.



'BUT SOMEHOW, THANK GRUNGI, I SURVIVED!



'THERE WAS ALMOST NOTHING LEFT OF THE MYSTERIOUS *ROCK-MUNCHING MACHINE* BUT ITS DESTRUCTION AND THE SUBSEQUENT CAVE-IN REVEALED AN *UNEXPECTED SURPRISE*.



I'M NO LONGER IN THE *MINING BUSINESS*. I NOW MAKE MY LIVING SELLING *CHARMS AND TRINKETS*. IN FACT, THAT'S WHAT'S BROUGHT ME BACK TO *THE CAT*.

CAN I INTEREST ANY OF YOU IN ONE OF THESE LITTLE BEAUTIES?

WOW!

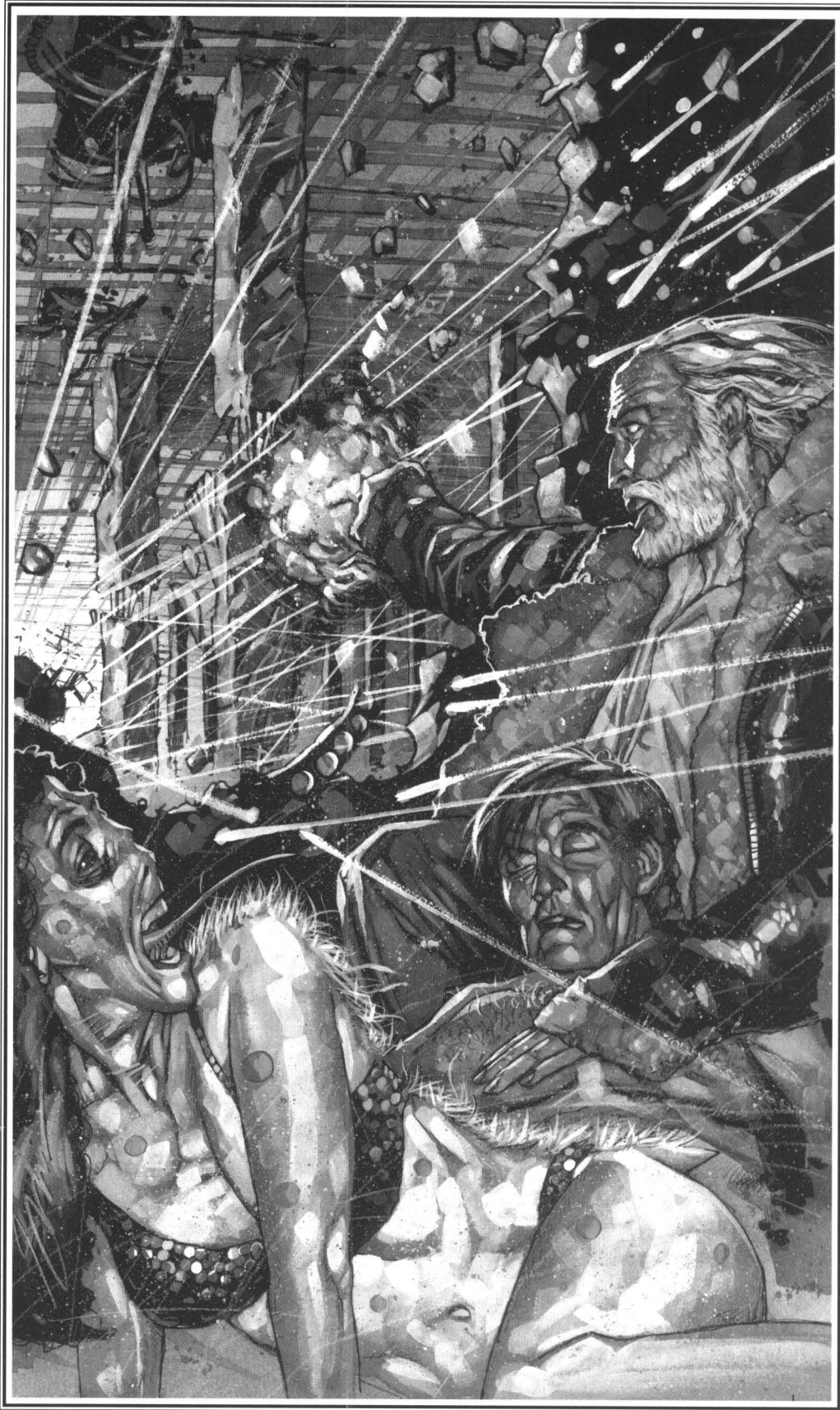


THIS IS GOOD WORK GRUMMUND. THE BEST!

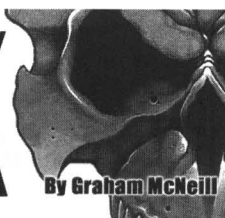


YOU KNOW, I REALLY THINK THESE THINGS ARE GOING TO CHANGE MY LIFE.

THE END



PAYBACK



By Graham McNeill

GUNSMOKE and brick dust filled the stinking bedroom, blasted clear by the gunfire from outside. Cornelius sat below the window with his back to the wall, holding his stubber between his knees as he thumbed more cartridges into the breech. Shouted commands and the sound of running feet told him he didn't have much time before Constantine's men came for him. As he loaded the weapon he kept his laspistol trained through the broken mirror door. Low moans and anguished cries drifted from the landing outside, and the mutant whore's shrill screaming from the bed grated on his already taut nerves.

He snapped the stubber's breech shut and aimed the gun at the shrieking mutant.

'You'd better shut up unless you want to be next,' he growled, nodding towards the bullet-riddled body of Trask, his naked body lying on top of the bloody bedsheets.

Trask's heavy boots hung over the end of the bed, the laces dangling to the floor. Cornelius shook his head at his former partner's lack of class. Only a low-life like Trask would pay for one of Mama Pollyanna's girls and take her to bed with his boots on.

The girl in question clutched a spattered blanket around her, her black eyes wide and her whipping tongue stretched fully a foot from her mouth as she screamed the place down. A thick mane of fiery orange hair spilled around her feline face, running in a mohawked trail down her spine. Her skin was bronzed and smooth, like honey, and he could well understand why Trask had picked her. What other talents her mutations had granted her in her profession he could only guess at.

He heard heavy footfalls and whispered conversation from outside the room as a spray of bullets and lasbolts ripped through the window, splintering the frame and raining broken glass to the floor. The girl screamed again and pounced from the bed, clawing at him with her nails as two of

Constantine's thugs burst into the room, shotguns at the ready.

Cornelius fired twice, both shots going wild as the naked girl kicked and punched, dragging her long, painted nails down his face while shrieking like a banshee. He rolled and hammered his elbow into her face, snapping her head back. The first thug opened up with his shotgun, blasting a plate-sized chunk of brickwork from the wall.

Cornelius swung the unconscious girl around in front of him, using her body as a shield, and blew the back of the shooter's head clear with a single lasbolt. The second gunman hesitated, trying to draw a bead on Cornelius without hitting Mama's most requested girl. Cornelius didn't give him a chance to regret his mistake and shot him in the belly with his stubber. The man screamed and crumpled, clutching his bloody midriff.

Cornelius threw the mutant girl onto the bed as an explosion above him rained timber and plaster from a hole blasted in the ceiling. He saw shapes through the pall of smoke and dived forwards, scooping up a fallen shotgun and rolling onto his back below the hole.

Pain tore at him as the synth-flesh bandage Monque had applied ripped free and blood ran down his side. He racked the shotgun's slide and fired upwards three times, hearing the screams of wounded men and the thump of bodies on the floor above him.

Keeping the shotgun aimed through the hole in the ceiling, Cornelius scrambled to his knees, turning and putting a lasbolt through the skull of the second man who'd come through the door as he weakly reached for his fallen weapon.

He crawled back to his position beneath the window, sweat pouring from his face as he heard the wailing sirens of approaching Special Security Agent Rhinos.

Cornelius swore silently to himself.

How had he allowed things to get so messed up?



‘CORNELIUS Barden?’ said the girl. ‘I’ve not heard of you before.’ ‘No reason you should have,’ replied Cornelius. ‘I’m new on Karis Cephalon.’

The girl nodded, cocking her head to one side. ‘Trask says you killed six men at the spaceport when you jacked these weapons.’

‘Trask talks too much,’ said Cornelius.

The girl smiled in agreement and he was again struck by how young she was. Trask’s contacts had set this meeting up, but he’d had trouble believing that this girl, Lathesia, could actually be the leader of the mutant resistance here in Cephalon. But she knew her stuff and he was impressed by her easy confidence.

‘Hey, easy, Con! I’m standin’ right here,’ whined Cornelius’s partner, Milos Trask.

Both Cornelius and Lathesia ignored him.

‘Is it true though? Did you kill them?’ she pressed.

‘Yes, I killed them. So what?’ shrugged Cornelius.

‘So what indeed,’ agreed Lathesia. Her black eyes glittered in the dim light cast by the hooded glowlamps as she knelt and lifted a blue-steel plasma gun from one of the packing crates sitting on the ground between them.

‘Who did these belong to?’ she asked, tapping her fingers against the scorched side of the crate where a shipping marking had once been stamped.

‘What do you care?’ replied Cornelius.

‘I don’t.’

‘Then why ask?’

‘I just wanted to see if you’d tell me,’ shrugged Lathesia, handing the plasma gun to one of the two heavily-built men flanking her. Both were mutants, their skin a mottled purple and their limbs grossly swollen. Cornelius could tell they were just itching for an excuse to use the battered rifles – antique PDF surplus – they carried. Though if this deal went through, the mutant resistance would suddenly become a whole

lot better armed and he’d be a whole lot richer.

There was just one catch.

‘Red’ Ivan Constantine.

Selling weapons to mutants was treading on Constantine’s toes and if the arms dealer knew about this deal, he’d be lethally opposed to it.

Cornelius knew this deal was dangerous and his senses were electric. Everyone was nervous. Everyone but him and Lathesia.

The deal vibed strange. The deal vibed wrong.

Trask was tight as a drum. Sweat stink and nervous energy poured from him in waves. Cornelius didn’t like it. It smelled of set-up. But of who?

He shook his head with a smile. ‘You want to go direct to source next time. Cut out the middle man.’

‘Something like that,’ nodded the teenage girl, running a hand through her dark hair, and even in the dim light, Cornelius could make out the scabbing flesh on her arms. Aside from her eyes, it was one of the few visible signs of her mutant heritage.

Anyplace else, she’d be ostracised, but here in the mutant ghetto, he was the outsider.

She caught his gaze and smiled humourlessly.

‘Do you have a problem that I’m a mutant?’

‘Not so long as you pay us, little girl,’ said Trask, unashamedly ogling her curves.

The largest of Lathesia’s mutant guards stepped forward, lips pursed together.

‘Call her that again and I’ll put bullets in you, Trask,’ he snapped.

Trask raised his hands in mock terror and laughed, ‘Ooooh, the mutants are mad at me! I’m so scared.’

The mutant raised his rifle, but Lathesia stopped him with a curt gesture.

Cornelius masked his annoyance at Trask, again regretting his decision to hook up with the man on this venture. It had seemed like an easy score; selling arms at inflated prices to the mutant population of Karis Cephalon, who were too dumb to realise they were being ripped off. Ever since they had heisted the guns from the spaceport, Trask had been nothing but a liability, his loose mouth and lack of personal hygiene at

odds with Cornelius's stoicism and careful grooming. But for his contacts within the mutant underground, Cornelius would have killed him the moment they'd made their escape from the heist.

'I don't give a damn if you're a mutant, xeno or pureblood,' said Cornelius. 'Your cash is as good as anyone else's.'

Lathesia locked eyes with him, holding his gaze for long seconds until, at last, she nodded, apparently satisfied with his answer. She waved her hand to the less aggressive of her companions, who stepped forwards with a burlap sack, secured at the neck with a rope drawstring. He tossed it at Cornelius's feet, where Trask seized upon it with a whooping laugh. Cornelius kept his eyes on Lathesia as Trask lifted out bundles of tied bills and fed them into an auto-counter. The machine flickered quickly through the money, its tiny machine spirit checking denominations and for counterfeit bills.

At a shade over two metres, Cornelius Barden was of above average height, and his build was that of a pit-fighter. His shoulders were wide and powerful, his waist narrow and his chest slabbed with thick muscle. He wore a long greatcoat, hiked over the butt of his stubber and his silver hair and beard reflected the torchlight. Every movement spoke of control.

Over the mumbled counting of Trask, Cornelius heard a scrape of metal. He made sure not to move, but his senses cranked up a notch. Someone was out there. Not SSA. Not this deep in the mutant ghetto; the alarm would have been sounded long ago and they'd be roaring in with bullhorns and searchlights. No, this was something else. Constantine? Log that as a possible.

Trask finished counting the money and pulled the bag's drawstring tight.

'We happy?' asked Cornelius.

'Damn straight we happy, Con,' said Trask, dropping the auto-counter into the sack, slinging it over his shoulder and backing away from the mutants. Cornelius lost sight of Trask as he moved beyond his peripheral vision. He heard another scrape. Boots on gravel. Upgrade the Constantine possibility to a probability.

Closer now, more steps. Lathesia noticed it now, eyes narrowing, unable to see much beyond the torchlight. She shot a hurried

glance at Cornelius. He shook his head and reached for his stubber. She whipped out a heavy revolver and sprinted for cover.

Gunshots split the night, pistols and lasguns. Cornelius felt a whipcrack sting of bullet fragments against his cheek. Something snatched at the hem of his greatcoat as he dived towards a built-up pile of debris.

One of the mutants was down, his guts burned open by twin lasblasts. The other returned fire into the darkness, screaming in defiance.

Very dumb, thought Cornelius as a flurry of bullet impacts cratered his chest. A final shot took off the top of his head. Cornelius heard the boom of Lathesia's gun and low crawled back the way he'd come, trying to spot the attackers and, more importantly, Trask and the money. Lathesia was on her own. He owed her nothing.

He heard scrabbling feet, ten metres west, and made his way through the rubble towards it as a voice echoed through the night.

'Barden! I know you can hear me, so you listen good eh? I only want my money. This turf, it mine, and you know it. Just hand over the money and I call it even! What you say to that, huh?'

Cornelius had seen Ivan Constantine, though had never spoken to him. But he knew instinctively that the thickly accented voice was his. He silently backed away from the source of the shout. If Constantine thought he was dumb enough to answer, then they had a lot to learn about Cornelius Barden.

He ghosted through the detritus of the mutant ghetto, putting as much distance between him and Constantine. The deal was done and he wanted to get out of here before the arms dealer's men realised he was gone. He had to find Trask. Quickly. Give the man ten minutes and he'd blow the score in dice games or on a girl. His partner would have no compunction about ditching Cornelius the moment it looked like he was in trouble, but Cornelius didn't blame him. He'd do the same.

The noise he'd been circling towards resolved itself as a man, crouched low with a long barrelled lasrifle. Cornelius drew a power knife and thumbed the activation rune, the blade glowing faintly with lethal energy.

Two steps and he closed the gap, wrapping his thick arms around the man's neck. His victim's arms came up, clawing. Cornelius hammered the full length of the power knife through the man's armpit and into his heart. The man's struggles ceased instantly. Cornelius eased the corpse to the ground, too late catching the click of a hammer easing back behind him.

He spun. He caught a muzzle flash and a silhouette. Fiery red pain flared in his side. He fell, blood pumped, hot and fast. He snapped off a couple of shots – wide. His vision blurred as he hit the ground hard. Fireflies spun before his eyes. More shouts sounded behind him. Constantine's men caught for him.

The one who'd shot him turned and ran from the shouts. His direction and his sweat stink told Cornelius who it was.

Trask.



HE RAN. He stumbled. He fell. But he kept going. Gritting his teeth and pressing his hand hard into the wound, he kept going. Several times his pursuers came close, but each time he hunkered down, fighting to keep his breathing quiet and even. He almost blacked out twice, biting his lip till it bled to keep from slipping into unconsciousness. His body was running on pure adrenaline, but he could feel his strength fading fast. He had to keep moving, to stop was to die.

He pulled a stimm inhaler from his coat and took a huge breath. Fresh vigour poured through his limbs as the Spur took effect. It was risky taking a stimm when he'd lost so much blood, but what choice did he have?

Blood soaked his fatigues and filled his boot, leaving bloody prints in his wake. He needed help badly and there was only one place in Cephalon where he could get it.

It was nearly a kilometre away in the old royal quarter, but he had no choice.



CHIRURGEON Monque pulled back the bolt on his door, unlocking the six padlocks that secured the steel door to his ad-hoc surgery. He was no stranger to midnight callers and was therefore not surprised to see the slumped form of a man gripping the metal frame of his door. There had been gunshots earlier, but with increased SSA crackdowns and riots breaking out almost daily, that wasn't unusual.

He knelt beside the man, pressing his fingers against his neck. There was a pulse; erratic, but strong.

Monque checked the street in both directions to see if this man had brought trouble to his door, but there was nothing to be seen other than the usual collection of vicious night-owls that prowled the streets of Cephalon in this unsavoury district.

He lifted the man's blood-soaked coat, grimacing as he saw the bullet wound in his side. He rolled the man over onto his side, shaking his head as he saw there was no exit wound. Which meant the bullet was probably lodged deep in a vital organ or had fragmented on a bone, shredding his intestines.

Monque sighed and replaced the man's coat over his wound.

He said, 'I think you might be out of luck, my friend.'

As he made to stand, the man's hand reached up, gripping him tightly and Monque was amazed at his strength.

'I have money,' he hissed, thrusting a handful of bills towards Monque.

Monque snatched them from the man's hand and smiled.

'Well why didn't you say so?' said Monque and dragged Cornelius inside.



CORNELIUS took another swig from the bottle, feeling the cheep rotgut sear its way down his gullet. As filthy a concoction as it surely was, it dulled his senses to the agony in his side. He drank again and laid his head back on the table.

'I'll add that to your bill,' said Monque, wheeling over a rusted gurney laden with surgical instruments.

'Whatever. Just get on with it, damn you,' said Cornelius as Monque snapped on a pair of surgical gloves.

The surgeon took the bottle from Cornelius's fingers, placing it on a nearby cabinet filled with vials of coloured solutions. A gurgling medicae transfuser pumped fresh blood into his body, and he experienced a moment of panic as he suddenly wondered where it came from. Was it mutant blood? Might it be infected with the plague that had swept through the mutant population in the last few weeks? Would it make him like the twisted wretches he'd seen eking out a slave's existence in the mutant ghetto?

Monque saw his concern and chuckled.

'Don't worry; it's clean. And anyway, despite what the priests will tell you, mutant blood is just like yours and mine. Their corruption is of the soul, not the blood.'

The surgeon selected a plastic hypodermic syringe from the tray before him and stabbed the needle into a bottle filled with murky liquid. He half-filled the injector and tapped it before squirting a few droplets from the needle to release any remaining air bubbles.

'Is that sterile?'

'Probably not,' admitted Monque, 'But it will help the pain. It's a little concoction of my own actually. I call it Ease...you know, because it helps—'

'Ease the pain, yeah, I get it,' groaned Cornelius.

Monque sniffed, piqued at having his witticism ruined and jabbed the needle into Cornelius's arm with rather more force than was necessary. Cornelius winced, but smiled dreamily as the pain suppressant went to work almost instantaneously. Whatever other flaws Monque had, he brewed some damn fine chemicals.

Cornelius watched as Monque replaced the hypo on the tray and lifted a set of thin-legged forceps. The pain from his wound was still there, burning like a hot coal in his belly, but he felt strangely removed from it, as though it belonged to another person.

His thoughts, normally so quick and sharp, flowed like syrup, meandering their way towards a conclusion whose point was

forgotten by the time his numbed brain even remembered that there was one. It wasn't a sensation he particularly liked.

Monque lifted clear the bloody leather of his coat and shook his head again.

'The bullet has pushed dirt and burnt leather into the wound. You'll be lucky if you don't get an infection from this.'

Cornelius tried to answer, but his tongue felt too heavy to form the words. Monque smiled.

'Don't try and speak, the Ease will make that next to impossible.'

'Right,' slurred Cornelius and Monque's eyebrow rose a fraction.

Monque returned his attention to the wound and wiped it clear with a sodden rag. Blood pulsed weakly from the hole.

He extended his little finger and forced it into the bullet hole, twisting and prodding inside Cornelius's belly. He shook his head and pushed deeper, past the knuckle, rooting around for the hard touch of the bullet.

'Well at least it didn't strike any bone and fragment,' murmured Monque to himself.

Cornelius watched as more blood spilled across his belly, pooling beneath him on the table and dripping to the cracked tile floor. He groaned in pain, the none-too-tender ministrations of Monque penetrating even the fog of his Ease. He felt the forceps push into his flesh, Monque rummaging around in his belly for the bullet.

Monque grimaced. 'I can feel the Emperor-damned thing, but I can't quite reach it yet.'

He swapped the forceps for a surgical scalpel, pressing the sharp blade against the ragged edge of the bullet hole, cutting it wider and spreading the wound. He picked up the forceps once again and dug into Cornelius, tugging at the reluctant bullet.

Cornelius gripped the metal rails at the side of the table, knuckles white.

Three more times, Monque widened the wound with the scalpel before eventually the bullet came free in a wash of blood.

Cornelius roared in agony, ripping the metal rails free from the table.

He flopped back into a sticky red pool, the table awash with his blood.

Monque lifted the forceps and held them before Cornelius's eyes.

The bullet was less than a centimetre long, a flattened oval of silver steel splattered red.

He felt his strength fading again as Monque said, 'There, that wasn't so bad, was it?'

Cornelius blacked out.



SUNLIGHT breaking through a clear polythene window woke him. Cornelius blinked his gummed eyes open and licked his cracked lips. Then the pain hit him and he groaned. He lay on a stinking pallet bed, the thin sheet stained and malodorous. He pulled it back and looked at his bruised and raw flesh. A synth-flesh bandage had been applied to his wound.

He tried to push himself upright, but gave in as pain zipped up his side and set off supernovas in his head. He contented himself with propping himself up on his elbows and checking out his surroundings.

Through the window he could see the spire of the Amethyst Palace the locals called the Needle of Sennamis, which meant he was still in the old royal quarter. Probably still at Monque's then. How long had he been out? He rubbed a hand across his face, judging the stubble there to be a night's worth of growth.

The room was dirty, the tiles that remained on the walls cracked and stained a mouldy green. A bare wooden floor lay an inch deep in dust, and footprints led from the door to the bed. An upturned packing crate with a faded medicae stencil served as a makeshift table beside the bed. His guns lay on the crate. He checked both, unsurprised to find both empty.

The door opened. Instantly Cornelius swung his laspistol round.

'I do hope you're not planning on using that in here,' said Monque, setting a vial and syringe next to Cornelius's stubber.

'That depends.'

'Oh, on what?'

'On who comes through that door.'

Monque nodded, preparing another hypo-syringe from the bottle. 'I knew the moment I saw you, that you were trouble.'

'So why help me?' asked Cornelius, setting down his pistol.

'I have many weaknesses, my friend, and money is first among them. You gave me quite a sum last night. Don't you remember?'

'No.'

'Well, it was enough to run roughshod over my otherwise highly-tuned sense of self-preservation, I can tell you. However, having said that, I want you out of here. I can smell trouble on you and when it finds you: be somewhere else. I have enough of my own without your type bringing me more.'

'I'll be gone within the hour,' promised Cornelius, 'I have to find someone.'

'I just bet you do. I wouldn't want to be him, whoever he is,' said Monque.

'No, you wouldn't,' agreed Cornelius, grabbing Monque's hand as he pressed the needle of the syringe against his forearm.

'What's in that?'

'It's a dose of Ease, but don't worry, it's much weaker than the shot I gave you last night. It'll help the pain, but won't turn your head inside out.'

Cornelius released the surgeon's arm and allowed him to spike his vein.

The plunger was halfway when Cornelius heard the creak of a door opening downstairs. He whipped his arm away from Monque and wrapped his hand around the surgeon's neck.

'Did you tell anyone I was here?' hissed Cornelius.

Monque gasped, dropping the hypo and shaking his head furiously.

'No! I swear! Why would I?'

'So how did Constantine's men know to find me here?'

'Constantine? Ivan Constantine?' spluttered Monque. 'Emperor's holy blood! I knew you were trouble.'

He heard heavy footfalls on the stairs. The snap of a weapon being cocked.

'How did they know I was here?' demanded Cornelius again.

'There were a dozen or more people on the street last night!' wheezed Monque, his face purpling. 'Any one of them could have told Red Ivan you were here if his men wanted to find you.'

Cornelius swore, knowing Monque was right. 'Where's the energy pack? Quickly, before I break your damn neck.'

Monque nodded hurriedly. The footsteps neared the door. Floorboards creaked.

Monque reached into a pouch at his belt and pulled out a silver-steel laspistol power pack.

Cornelius grabbed it and slammed it home.

The door burst open. Cornelius aimed the laspistol.

Monque hit the floor. Bullets ripped through, cratering the wall above him. Cornelius rolled from the bed, crying out as pain engulfed his side. He put his first lasbolts through the door, but couldn't see if they hit anything.

The barrel of an autogun poked around the door, the barrel flaring as wild shots tore up the bed. Dust, smoke and roaring noise filled the room. A shadowy figure lurched inside, spraying the room with bullets.

Lying on his back, Cornelius gripped his pistol two-handed and squeezed the trigger three times.

The figure grunted and staggered backwards. For good measure, Cornelius fired three more times, pitching his victim through the window.

Monque poked his head above the level of the bed, looking through the torn, flapping polythene.

'Did you kill him?' he asked.

'I damn well hope so,' said Cornelius, 'because I don't have any more power.'

Monque threw Cornelius the pouch of ammunition.

'You need to go now,' he said emphatically.



CORNELIUS was as good as his word, leaving Monque's surgery within minutes, dropping another handful of crushed bills onto the bloody operating table on his way out. With his guns loaded, Cornelius left Monque's through the back, taking great pains to ensure he was unobserved.

His wound pulled tight. It bled a little. It hurt a lot.

But he'd been lucky. Had Trask's bullet been a few centimetres to the right, he'd be in the ground by now. He made his way through the streets of Cephalon, the city sweltering and stinking in the heat. Hover carriages passed him and shuttles screamed overhead, heading towards the spaceport as he limped from the royal quarter. He kept clear of the main arterial routes through the city, heading north towards the mutant ghetto.

He passed posters of Space Marines, promising him that His warriors were protecting him, devotional slogans painted on building sides and PDF recruitment posters.

He couldn't go back to the place he'd stowed his gear; Trask would surely have betrayed its location to Constantine.

It didn't matter. There was nothing there he'd miss.

He carried all his money with him and anything else he needed he could buy or steal.

But first he needed a place to rest up for a few days. He wasn't strong enough to take on Constantine yet.

Finding lodgings was easy enough. Cornelius paid for three nights in a run down flophouse, run by a fat man with an eye-patch and a shotgun. Cornelius greased him with some bills. He found his room, a filthy, bug-infested firetrap. He slept for sixteen hours.

He spent the time building his strength, working out his strategy.

Find Trask. Kill Trask. Take whatever was left of the score. Pretty simple really.

The days blurred. Cornelius stripped his weapons, preparing special hand-loads for the stubber. Dumdums and man-stoppers. One shot killers.

He ate in his room, he drank in the flophouse's excuse for a bar. He listened to the talk.

Riots had erupted in the mutant ghetto again. SSA snatch squads hit suspected mutant resistance safe houses, killing anyone they found. The mutants reciprocated, ambushing two SSA patrols and bombing several mercantile trading houses.

Rumour was that the ambushes had been carried out with some brand new weaponry. Weaponry the mutants weren't supposed to have. Questions were bound to be asked by senior members of the SSA and Cornelius knew it wouldn't take them long to come up with his name. Even if Constantine didn't give him up, SSA snitches would hear it from Trask's flapping mouth.

Simmering tension filled the streets. Gunshots became endemic.

People talked of revolution. Cornelius saw opportunities.

Cephalon's movers and shakers tried to put a soothing spin on events. Holocausts of Cardinal Kodazcka showed the holy man appealing for calm from his pulpit. The powerful mercantile families called for the Governor to maintain order and protect their holdings. Nothing was forthcoming from the Amethyst Palace but stony silence. Rumours flew that the Governor was missing. Said rumours were denied vehemently.

As night drew in on the third day, Cornelius holstered his pistols, filled his belt loops with speed-loaders and pulled on his greatcoat. He'd rested long enough and though he was nowhere near fully fit, he was strong enough to take out Trask.

Time to get going. Where would Trask go?

The answer came easy: gambling dens and whorehouses.



THE NORTH-EAST quarter of Cephalon was a haven for mutants, desperadoes, killers, thieves and deviants. If Trask was going to be anyplace, it would be here. Cephalon by night was loud, brash and unashamed. The wild scions of the wealthy families slumped it here, trolling the whorehouses and dope dens for thrills they couldn't get elsewhere.

The streets heaved with bodies. Dealers sold their wares from street corners. Women sold themselves from shadowed doorways. Voices were raised and flashing neon bathed everything in rainbows of sickly light.

Cornelius moved through the crowds, his eyes constantly in motion as he scanned faces. He changed direction often, checking

for anyone following him. He saw no one, but in this place there could be a dozen people tailing him and he wouldn't know it.

Trask was here somewhere; he could smell him.

He pictured Trask's narrow, pale face, trying to think like him. Brothels, drug dens and dice halls lined the roads. Where to start? He picked one at random, easing through the doors and circulating.

Smoke from bac-sticks and cheap cigars hugged the ceiling. Gamblers and hustlers filled the den, but Cornelius knew this place was out of Trask's league. He'd know he'd get fleeced here before he'd finished his first drink.

Cornelius ruled out twelve more places before he found Mama Pollyana's.

The moment he saw the place he knew he'd hit paydirt. Trask would riff on this place.

An ugly, sprawling stucco pile with neon and holo-streamers cavorting above the roof. Flame-wreathed columns spurted fire either side of the ribbed oval doorway as revellers drank and howled before the building. A hugely fat woman paraded before the entrance with a bullhorn, extolling the virtues of Mama's girls.

Mutant tail, the best there is. Come inside and do the twist.

Cornelius marched up the worn steps and brushed off the fat woman's hand, noticing the scarred texture of her mutant flesh.

Trask was here. He was sure of it.



THE BARMAN was a mutant. All the workers in Mama Pollyana's place were; the bar staff, the bruisers, the whores, the singers and the gunmen loitering in the shadows. He tagged four mutants with guns. None looked threatening. Two of them guarded the stairs that led upwards to the private booths. If Trask was here, that's where he'd be.

Cornelius ordered a glass of amasec, sipping the drink slowly and panning across the room. Three girls gyrated to a pounding soundtrack on a stage at the far end of the wide hall, thrusting their altered bodies

towards the baying crowd. Unlike the vast majority of mutants, most of these girls had escaped the worst horrors of their condition; the atrophied limbs, the scaled skin or distended, molten faces.

One girl's bikini top had been extensively modified to accommodate her altered physique while a whipping, prehensile tail swished behind the second. Barely a metre tall, she nevertheless had her fair share of whooping admirers. Cornelius couldn't see any visible mutations on the last girl until she leapt onto a silvered pole and spun around it, her every joint twisting in unnatural ways. She bent herself backwards, flipping her legs through a loop of her arms and vaulted over the heads of the other girls. She landed on her hands, spinning onto her feet to rapturous applause.

Cornelius grinned, imagining how versatile she could be in her chosen profession. Working girls circulated the bar and Cornelius caught the eye of a young woman wearing a scarlet rubber bodyglove, strategically holed to best display her wares. Her skin was patterned with red blotches and dozens of multi-coloured electroos writhed beneath her flesh, rotating and swirling with the discolouration of her skin to form a kaleidoscope of colours and images. The birth of a star, a swelling sunrise and a bleeding heart.

She smiled, coquettishly angling her head to one side and sashaying towards him, unlacing her upper bodice. She leaned on the bar next to him and lifted his amasec, draining it in a single swallow.

'You want to buy me another?' she asked, leaning forward and giving Cornelius a glimpse of her multi-coloured flesh.

Cornelius shook his head. 'No. I want to go upstairs.'

She grinned. 'You don't mess about, do you?'

'Not if I can help it, no,' said Cornelius, sliding a roll of bills across to her.

'Alright then, honey,' purred the girl, slipping the cash into her cleavage and playing with his collar. 'I can be real nice to you, or I can be sure to punish you if you've been bad. If you know what I mean.'

Cornelius nodded and allowed himself to be led towards the stairs. He played meek as the armed mutants checked him out. The girl walked ahead of him, the rubber of her outfit gleaming as it stretched tight across her backside.

The landing at the top of the stairs curled around the hall below, the wood-panelled walls studded with mirrored doors. Opaque from inside, transparent from the outside, the views were designed to titillate.

Electro-candles flickered, held aloft in bobbing suspensor fields. Business must be booming.

The girl turned left, beckoning him with a curling finger. Instead, Cornelius turned right, checking out the rooms on the opposite side of the landing. He heard the girl call after him, but ignored her, pressing his face to the glass of each door in turn.

There. Cornelius smiled humourlessly as he saw Trask's skinny legs poking from under a bedsheet and his lank hair flopping over a girl with a bright orange mane.

He pushed open the door and drew his laspistol. Trask leapt from the bed, his face going from indignant rage to sheer terror in the space of a second.

'Con! You're alive!'

'No thanks to you, you bastard,' replied Cornelius, backhanding his pistol across Trask's jaw. Trask dropped, blood sprayed the wall and teeth flew. Trask's girl screamed.

Behind him, he heard the girl who'd led him upstairs shout for the armed mutants at the bottom of the stairs. He picked up Trask, his jaw drooling blood to the carpet.

'Where's my money?' demanded Cornelius.

Trask shook his head and Cornelius hit him again, hard. Once in the face, once in the gut. Trask folded, but Cornelius held him up.

'I'm going to ask you once more, Trask. And then I'll put my fist through your face.'

Before Trask could answer, Cornelius heard the mutant gunmen outside. He released Trask and dropped to his knees, swinging round and emptying his clip through the mirrored door. He heard screams and the sound of falling bodies.

Trask grabbed for a pistol beside the bed, but Cornelius was ready for him and batted it from his hands, sending it crashing through the window. As the window shattered, he saw upturned faces and a group of armed men making their way through the crowds of people towards the brothel. He recognised Constantine at the centre of the group and cursed as he realised he'd been set up.

They knew he'd go after Trask and just waited for him to put his head in the noose.

He locked eyes with Constantine, hearing him bark orders and seeing his men raise their weapons. He dropped to the floor as bullets and lasbolts shells blasted through the window and popped chunks of brickwork from the wall.

Trask's torso disintegrated under the fusillade, his body torn to pieces. He flopped onto the bed, the mutant whore's screams reaching new heights.

Cornelius kept his head down as bullets peppered the outside wall, rising to his knees and firing both his guns into Constantine's men. Most of his shots went wide, but four of Constantine's men went down. Screams filled the street.

Constantine's men scattered, running for the entrance to Mama Pollyana's. Cornelius emptied the stubber, ducking back to reload.

Things were now officially messed up.



THE WAIL OF sirens told Cornelius that the SSA were now on their way. He risked a glance out the shattered window, seeing three black Rhinos lumber down the street and grind to a halt just in front of the brothel.

Constantine was nowhere to be seen. Was he already inside or had he made good his getaway when he'd heard the sirens? It didn't matter at the moment, Cornelius had to avoid capture first. If the SSA got hold of him, it wouldn't take them long to link him to the stolen guns and the mutant resistance's ambushes.

He leaned over, wincing as fresh blood leaked from the wound in his side and shook his head at Trask's foolishness as he

pulled out the sack Lathesia had given them from under the bed. There was bound to be some cash missing, but there was still a satisfying weight to it.

Quickly, he slung the bag and holstered his pistols. He discarded the shotgun he'd fired through the ceiling – the SSA would shoot a man with a shotgun on sight – and slipped from the room.

He stepped over the two mutants he'd shot through the door and into a scene of utter bedlam. At least two dozen SSA agents were trashing the joint; clubbing aside mutants and purebloods as they dragged anyone they could lay their hands on outside. Their shock mauls rose and fell in time to the thumping music. Flashing strobes rendered everything surreal.

The brothel's patrons screamed, desperate to escape.

He saw a lone SSA agent behind the bar. The agent clubbed the barman, splitting his skull open and pounding his brains out. Cornelius vaulted the balcony, landing feet-first on the SSA agent's neck and breaking his back. He rolled, keeping out of sight behind the bar, gritting his teeth in pain. Holding his injured side, he dragged the dead agent towards him.

He shucked off his greatcoat and swiftly began stripping the agent's armour and uniform. A thrown tankard shattered mirrored glass and liquor bottles above him.

Cornelius worked fast, pulling on the agent's grey trousers and jacket. Swiftly he buckled on the heavy breastplate and took the agent's helmet, slipping it on and sliding down the visor. Grabbing the agent's shock maul, he rose to his feet and slammed it down hard on the dead barman, shouting, 'Filthy mutant scum!'

Still gripping the burlap sack, he made his way round the bar and waded into the mass of bodies, clubbing his way towards the main doors.

The SSA agents ignored him, but a young man wearing expensive clothes tried to barge past him. He slammed his fist into his face twice, breaking the man's nose and rendering him insensible. Cornelius dragged him through the door and down the steps of the brothel to the waiting Rhinos.

Flashing lights on the troop transports cast a flickering glow across the brothel. Jeering crowds filled the street behind the black troop vehicles. SSA agents manned pintel mounted guns as a line of troops bundled the brothel's patrons into the holding cells in the back of the vehicles.

Cornelius walked confidently towards the furthest Rhino, hauling the staggering young man towards the SSA agent standing there. He glanced round. All attention was focussed on Mama Pollyana's.

'One for the cells,' said Cornelius. He pushed his victim into the SSA agent, who grabbed the falling man. Cornelius stepped close and hammered his upturned palm into the agent's windpipe. The man dropped, gagging for breath, and Cornelius pushed both men into the back of the transport.

He ditched the stolen helmet and unclipped the breastplate. He kept the shock maul and jogged away from the transports, quickly joining the concealing ranks of the crowd. He gripped the money sack tight, his other held tight over the synth-flesh bandage as he pushed his way through.

Even as he made his way from Mama Pollyana's, he grinned wolfishly as he saw Ivan Constantine lurking at the back of the crowd in the shadowed doorway of a derelict building. Two of his thugs stood either side of him, the bulge of firearms clearly visible.

Taking an oblique route, he circled towards them, his thumb hovering above the activation rune of the shock maul. A small circle of space surrounded the arms dealer, his bodyguards allowing no-one to come too close to their boss. Cornelius knew stealth was out of the question and pressed the activation rune of the shock maul, marching straight towards the group.

The nearest bodyguard saw him coming and moved to intercept.

Cornelius slammed the maul across his face, breaking his jaw. The second drew a bead on him with his gun. Cornelius didn't give him a chance to fire, driving the crackling weapon into his groin and dropping him to the ground. The stench of scorched flesh hit his nostrils.

Constantine drew a silver laspistol. Cornelius smashed the maul across his hand, breaking fingers, then drove it hard

into the arms dealer's gut. Constantine dropped to his knees.

Cornelius kicked open the sagging door behind Constantine and, gripping him by the hair, dragged him inside. Cornelius pulled the wheezing Constantine to the furthest corner of the burnt-out building.

He pulled his stubber, emptied out half the shells and spun the barrel. He showed Constantine, then jammed it under his jaw.

'You know who I am?' asked Cornelius.

'You're a dead man,' sneered Constantine.

'Wrong answer,' said Cornelius and pulled the trigger.

The hammer slammed down on an empty chamber. Constantine yelped.

'Now I'll assume that was just a necessary show of bravado,' continued Cornelius, 'and that you're ready to listen to me now.'

Constantine bit his lip and Cornelius smiled, placing the cash Lathesia had paid him beside him.

'I could kill you now, Ivan, but I'm not going to. I've killed a bunch of your men, but I'm not going to kill you.'

Seeing Constantine's puzzled expression, Cornelius said, 'Here's the deal. You're buying your life with this money. I don't kill you, walk away with whatever Trask's left me of it and we call this whole sorry mess even. Live and let live, agreed?'

Constantine said nothing, his eyes blazing hatred.

Cornelius pulled the trigger again.


The hammer clicked down on another empty chamber.

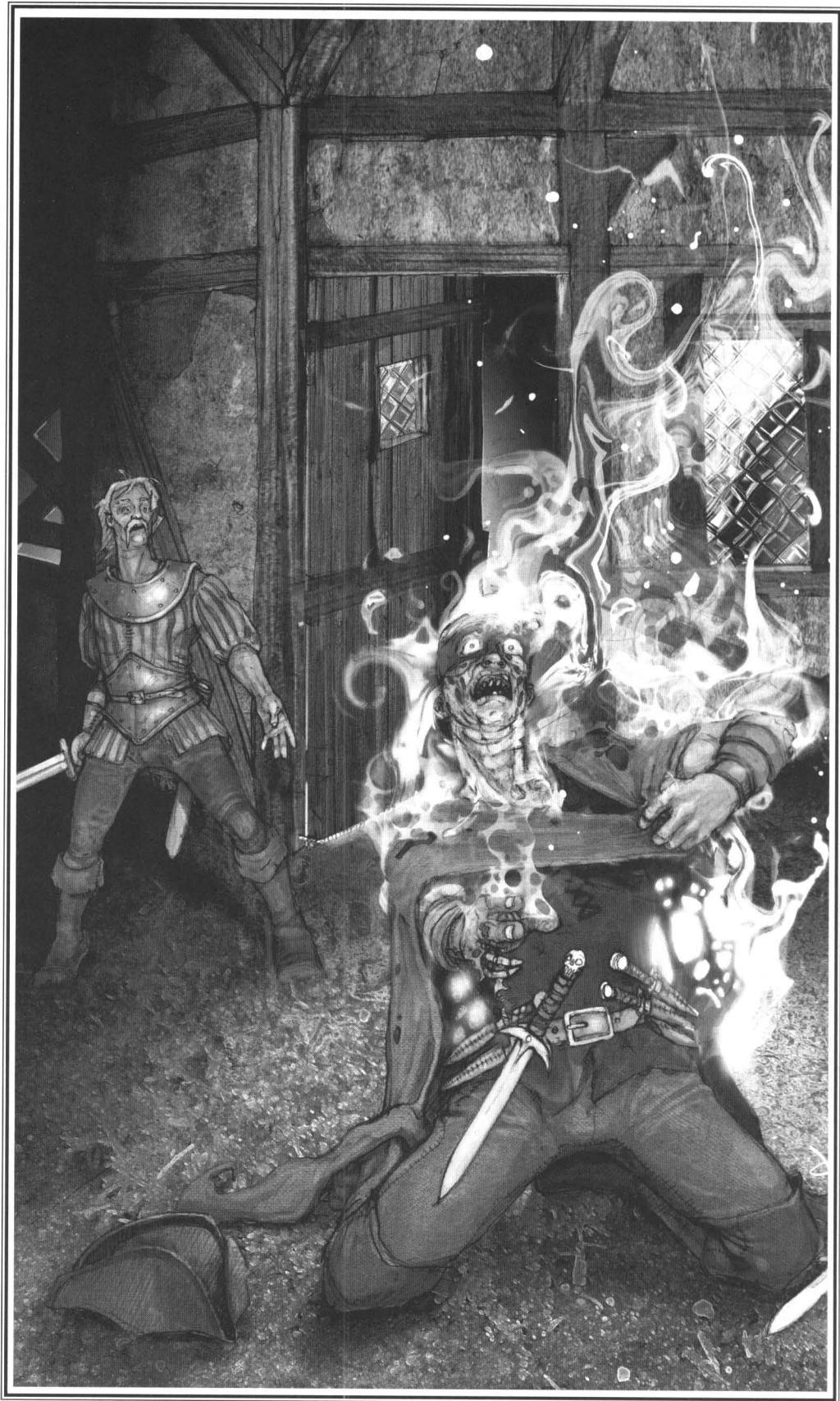
'Alright, alright!' snapped Constantine, but his eyes told another story.

Cornelius nodded and rose to his feet. 'Smart decision, Ivan. I figure there's got to be enough money to be made on this Emperor-forsaken planet to keep us both happy. And I just know you're smart enough to know that we can be useful to each other.'

'Very well,' hissed Constantine. 'I won't have you killed for this, but pull a stunt like this again and you're a dead man, Cornelius Barden.'

Cornelius shrugged. 'I can live with that. It's all just part of the game, Ivan,' he said.

He turned and disappeared into the flickering glow of Cephalon's night. 



Rest for the Wicked

by James Wallis

THE KÖNIGPLATZ in Altdorf was full of the bustle and hubbub of its morning market. Carts, barrows and stalls blocked the streets and people crammed together, jostling and shoving to move between the sellers, their arms burdened down with purchases. The air was full of the smell of fresh vegetables, roasting meat, fresh-baked bread, lavender and beer. The stallholders's shouts echoed from the tall buildings surrounding the square: 'Who'll buy my schnitzel?'; 'Estalian wines, strong and cheap'; 'Pound of black bread, only sixpence'; 'Horsemeat, fresh slaughtered'; and 'You hooligan – stop!'

A small man with dark hair and the eyes and long moustache of a Kislevite had leaped onto the shouter's table of pastries. He stood there for a second, looking round in panic, then jumped down into the crowd, pushing his way through. Twenty yards behind him two men were giving chase, one short, slim and blond, one tall and dark, both wearing leather jerkins. The dark one had his sword drawn.

'Imperial officers! Clear the way!' the blond man roared in a voice that seemed to come from a man twice his bulk. His tall partner vaulted the table in a leap and landed beside the stallholder. 'Which way did he go?' he demanded. The man pointed. Dark looked at blond.

'North.'

'The city gate.'

'Let's go!'

They sprinted through the market and down the street, darting through gaps in the crowd, trying to keep their quarry in sight. It wasn't easy; the streets were crowded with early-morning traffic, pedestrians, people on their way to work or heading home after a long night. Carts and horses moved slowly through the

throng, blocking the way. There was no sign of the short man. The taller of the pursuers stopped, staring across the packed bodies, trying to see movement.

'This way, Johansen,' the blond man said, pointing to a side-street. 'Short cut.'

'Thanks, Grenner.' Johansen followed his partner. The road twisted, then widened, and ahead he could see the stonework of Altdorf's great city walls and the flags flying high above the north gate. Someone shouted in the crowd, people moved aside, and he caught a glimpse of a short man with dark hair and a long black moustache. The Kislevite. Johansen sprinted after him.

Something was happening at the gate. Mounted members of the city watch were moving people out of the way, clearing a path through the crowd as a column of soldiers in Middenland colours rode into the city, two abreast. Behind them was an older man in rich fur-trimmed clothes on a magnificent chestnut stallion, followed by a train of carriages.

As the crowd was parting to let the procession through, the Kislevite dodged through the milling bodies and ducked away, running through the throng towards the gate. Johansen, a few yards behind, found his way blocked by a halberd. The guards were dismounting, using their weapons to keep the watchers back.

'Imperial officers! Let us through!' shouted Grenner, a few yards behind.

The guard's face was stony. 'Can't do that, sir. Not while the Elector Count's passing.'

'Sigmar's beard...' Johansen put a hand on the halberd. It didn't move. The guard looked past him curiously.

'Sergeant Grenner?' he said. 'Is that you? I haven't seen you in years.'

'Promotion,' Grenner said. 'Let us pass.'
'Orders, sir. We're protecting the Elector.'

Grenner swore and started to argue. Johansen watched the procession, knowing it wouldn't make any difference now. The Kislevite had escaped, the operation was blown, three weeks of work was down the cistern, and Hoffmann was going to be very unhappy.

He looked at the man on the horse. Grand Duke Leopold von Bildhofen, Elector-Count of Middenland, one of the twelve most powerful men in the Empire. He didn't look powerful; he looked bored and tired, and his horse looked the same. They'd probably been on the road since dawn.

Then the Kislevite broke from the crowd and cut across the open space in front of the soldiers, towards the procession. He darted in front of the Elector's horse and it shied, stepping sideways. Then it shuddered for an instant, and Johansen knew something was wrong. He grabbed Grenner, who turned as the great chestnut horse bolted, scattering the soldiers, heading down the street that led to the Königplatz, its rider thrown forwards onto its neck.

Johansen pushed the guard away from his horse, grabbing its reins, putting a foot in the stirrup.

'Hey, you can't-' one of the guards shouted.

'Someone's got to,' Grenner said, already astride the other horse. They dug their heels in and galloped after the runaway.

The chestnut stallion was at full gallop and the crowds parted like a ripped sheet to get out of its way. The north end of the street was clear but the Königplatz ahead was filled with the carts and stalls of the morning market; if the panicked horse tried to jump one, or slipped on the cobbles, then its rider was a dead man.

They were gaining on the runaway, but not fast enough. The chestnut would be tired from its journey and not used to city streets, while their horses were fresh and properly shod for running on cobbles, but something had panicked the stallion and that gave it the edge for speed. Johansen could see the Grand Duke pulling

frantically at the reins, trying to bring his mount under control and failing.

'Can we head him off?' he shouted to Grenner, a few yards away.

'Not enough room!'

'Go either side, then.' The sound of horses coming up from behind would push the chestnut to run faster, but it was the only chance they had.

Grenner went left, Johansen right, each urging their horses to more speed. The gap between them and the Elector narrowed. A drop of something wet landed on Johansen's hand and he glanced at it. Blood, but from where? He looked ahead at the stallion, only a couple of lengths away. There was a wet patch of sweat on its neck. No, not sweat; something thicker and darker.

The three horses began to draw level, the chestnut between the two Palisades agents. The Grand Duke's gaze was fixed ahead, on the market square, now frighteningly close. He didn't seem aware of them.

'Lift him!' Johansen shouted and stood in the stirrups. With one hand holding the reins he leaned across and gripped the duke's right arm. The nobleman jerked, his eyes darting to Johansen. Then, as Grenner grabbed his left arm, the two men lifted him clear of his saddle. Without the weight of its mount the chestnut surged ahead. Its muscles moving like wild poetry, it charged into the Königplatz and tried to leap a cart. Its rear legs skidded on the cobbles, slick with mud and rubbish. It fell. There was a noise of shattering wood, screams, an awful sound of pain. A thrashing that suddenly stopped.

Johansen and Grenner reined in their horses and lowered the Grand Duke to the ground. His face and clothes were spattered with blood. A crowd was staring at the three of them. The Middenland soldiers were cantering up, their swords drawn.

Johansen dismounted and bowed. 'Karl Johansen and Dirk Grenner of the Palisades, your Grace. I apologise for any rough-handling you received.'

The Grand Duke looked down at him. 'Good work,' he said, and his voice reminded Johansen of a man speaking to the servant who empties his chamber-pot. Then he noticed the Middenland soldiers and turned away to speak to them. Johansen straightened up, awkwardly. Grenner was looking at him.

'They never thank us,' he said.

'They never do,' Johansen said. 'Come on. I want to look at his horse.'

The two men walked into the marketplace where the great chestnut horse lay across two broken carts, surrounded by sausages, cheeses and cauliflowers. Its hind legs were twisted the wrong way. Someone had cut its throat to end its pain.

Johansen knelt and ran a hand over the blood-soaked hair on its neck. There was no sign of a slash or a cut, but his fingers found a pucker on the skin. He drew his dagger and dug into the dead flesh until he found what he knew would be there: the head of a crossbow bolt, strangely twisted, buried deep in the hot muscles of the neck. He cut around it and tugged it out. Its bloody steel barbs gleamed in the sunlight.



NOBODY SAW the assassin?' 'No, sir,' Hoffmann's chamber on the top floor of the Palisades building was not large, nor richly furnished. It had no great glass window with grand views, no wall-hangings, no oak panelling, no bookcases, no crossed axes, suits of armour nor pictures of the Emperor. It had Erik Hoffmann, and that was enough. His voice would have been enough. The deep Salzenmund accent, with its rolled vowels and hard consonants, made every word sound like a growled threat. A woman had once told Dirk Grenner that it was the most alluring voice she'd ever heard. That relationship hadn't lasted long.

'You're certain it wasn't the Kislevite or his comrades?' Hoffmann asked.

'Definite, sir,' Grenner said. 'If he'd known the shooting was going to happen he'd have led us away from it.'

Hoffmann stared at his two officers for a moment. Then he crossed to the window and stared out. 'This is an unholy mess,' he said. 'I've already had Lord Udo von Bildhofen, the Grand Duke's son in here, demanding that every Palisade agent drop what they're doing and guard his father, and wanting to be personally briefed about everything we're doing. The von Bildhofen family dines with the Emperor tonight. A negative report could be very bad for us.' He didn't turn round, but stood silent; a long, tense pause. Then: 'What did you make of the bolt?'

'Custom job, designed to rip open veins and organs,' Johansen said. 'I saw one like it during a Tilean campaign a few years back.'

'Quite right. I sent it down to Alchemics for analysis. The steel and wood are from the south of Tilea.'

'Why would a Tilean want to kill an Elector?' Grenner asked.

'More likely a Tilean assassin,' said Johansen.

'One hired by someone who wants the job done properly, I suspect.' Hoffmann turned, walked back to stand by his desk. 'The Grand Duke's nominated successor is his brother, Baron Siegfried. His wife is Tilean.'

'Think he's hungry for power?' said Grenner.

'Find out and stop the assassin. Before anyone important dies.' He picked up a folder of parchment from the desk and leafed through it, then looked back up. 'What are you waiting for? Go. And don't make this the second operation you botch today.'



THE INTERIOR of the tavern was dark, the ceiling low, the tables crowded, the drinkers Tilean. Curious and hostile eyes looked at the two Altdorfers as they entered, resenting their

intrusion. Most of the city's natives had the sense to stay out of the Tilean quarter, and the only ones who ventured into the Villa Bianca were either dupes, foolhardy or desperate.

At the back of the room two richly clothed Tileans were talking earnestly in low tones. Grenner and Johansen found a table, sat and waited.

'Nice place,' Johansen muttered ironically.

'Proof that all men are brothers,' Grenner said. 'Empire, Tilean, Kislevite or Bretonnian – come mealtime we're all in the alehouse.'

The taller of the two Tileans stood up, kissed the other's hand, and left. The smaller looked around and took a swig from an ornate glass beside him. Another man began to approach him, but he raised a hand, and then gestured to the two Palisades agents. Grenner walked up to the table and bowed. Johansen followed.

'Thank you, Signor Argentari.'

The short Tilean smiled. 'Sit, sit, Sergeant Grenner. It has been a long time. How is your life?'

'Not a sergeant any more, signor. I left the Watch some years ago.'

Argentari nodded sympathetically. 'I have heard. How can I help you in your new employment?'

Grenner said, 'Signor, do the Tileans have an argument with the Empire?'

'No more than usual. Why do you ask?'

'This morning someone tried to shoot the Elector Count of Middenland with a Tilean crossbow bolt.'

The signor's expression kept the practised placid look that gamblers, politicians and liars work hard to perfect. Then he shrugged. 'It is to be expected. We are the best crossbowmen in the world.'

'We need this man,' Grenner said.

'What makes you think I know any more than you?'

'Come off it, signor. You know the names of every Tilean in this city, where they'll sleep this night and how much money is in their purses, down to the last copper.'

'That is true,' the Tilean said. 'But my Reman ancestors had a phrase: "Quid pro quo". It means: what would I gain from

telling you?' He sat back, looking thoughtful.

Johansen leaned forward. 'I'll tell you what you gain,' he said and Grenner heard the frost on his voice. 'If the Grand Duke dies with Tilean steel in him, life goes bad for every one of your people in this city. I'm not just talking about muggings and beatings and arson. Your trade will dry up. Nobody will hire your men. Increased watch patrols. Increased surveillance. Your wives and children will be pariahs, spat at in the street. And worse. Tileans protect their own, Signor Argentari, but you know the Empire does the same. You call yourself the father of Little Tilea. Prove it.'

Argentari shrugged, but Grenner could tell his heart wasn't in it. Then he pulled a pocket-book from his jacket, flipped through it and laid it flat on the table. There was an address on the page.

Grenner looked at it, then at Johansen. 'What's the time?'

'Two bells rang a few minutes ago. Why?'

'The Grand Duke's meeting the Emperor this evening. He's a good Sigmarite, he'll want to pray first. In twenty minutes he'll be walking to the great temple for afternoon worship. Right past that house on Marianstrasse.'

They sprinted out of the Villa Bianca, towards the river-bridge, the palace district and the temple.



THE TOLLING of the temple bells echoed the agents' footsteps as they ran into Marienstrasse.

'Which house?' Johansen panted. Grenner pointed: he knew the district.

'Half-way down. Sign of the crossed gloves.'

They burst into the glove-maker's shop, past surprised customers in elegant dress and shocked staff in consternation. 'Who lets out the rooms upstairs?' Grenner demanded.

A short, slender grey-haired woman came forward. 'I do,' she said, 'but we don't have any vacancies.'

'You're about to,' said Johansen. Grenner shot him a look.

'A Tilean. Arrived recently. Which floor?' he asked.

'The top. Hey,' she said, 'you can't go through—'

Beyond the door the light was dingy, the stairs narrow and the stale air smelled of boiled vegetables. They took the stairs two at a time, matching their footfalls to the sonorous chimes of the temple bells. The door at the top was shut.

'You get the door, I'll get the suspect,' Johansen whispered, drawing his dagger.

'We need him alive.'

'I hadn't forgotten.'

Grenner looked at the door. It was stout but old, almost certainly locked, and probably barricaded on the other side. The lock was the first problem, and its bolt would be just about... there. He kicked the spot with his heel, hard. There was a crunch as it gave inwards, but only an inch.

'Damn!'

Something moved inside the room. Grenner charged the door, hitting it with his shoulder. It flew open with a crunch, a broken chair scattering across the floor. There was a man standing by the open window, with a crossbow. It was aimed at Grenner's face.

He threw himself sideways and down. There was a twang and things hurtled past his head. Someone went 'Uh!' and someone else went 'Ah,' and he didn't know if either of them had a Tilean accent.

He looked up. The assassin was still standing by the window. His expression was startled, because Johansen's throwing-dagger was sticking out of his stomach. He began to lift the crossbow.

Grenner scrambled to his feet, grabbing a piece of chair. Why wasn't Johansen following through?

'Drop it,' he warned.

'Grenner,' Johansen said quietly from behind him, 'that's a two-shot bow.'

The Tilean smiled. Blood was beginning to show on the clothes round his stomach-wound. He gestured with the crossbow towards a corner of the room. Grenner let his eyes flick over there, then as the Tilean's followed he hurled the chair-leg at him with all his might.

The assassin tried to duck. The piece of wood glanced off his head and smashed through the window-pane. Broken glass cascaded out into the street. It didn't seem to bother him. He moved across the room but the crossbow didn't waver. Grenner watched as his hand tightened on the trigger.

Suddenly the world was too bright. It reminded Grenner of something he'd seen once before and would never forget. 'Down!' he screamed and hit the floor again, his hands over his face.

The room went to awful white and heat and sound, squeezing everything else out of existence. It lasted an eternity, then suddenly it was done. Grenner lay where he was for a second, then looked up.

The Tilean had taken the main force of the blast. His corpse was still on fire. The room around it was destroyed, the walls cracked and cratered, the windows blown out, the curtains ablaze. The crossbow was ashes and burnt metal.

Grenner stood slowly, checking himself. His hair and face were singed, his hands red raw. His clothes were ruined; even the leather was cracked.

'I bloody hate magic,' he said to no one in particular.

'Grenner?' came Johansen's voice, weakly. Grenner turned. His partner lay at the top of the stairs, thrown there by the explosion. A crossbow bolt was sticking out of his chest. His blackened clothes were soaked with his blood.



AS THEY PASSED the landing of the second floor, heading down, Johansen said, 'Let's work through what happened.'

Grenner grunted. 'I've got a better idea. You work through what happened, I'll concentrate on getting you to a physician.'

'That works too.'

'Don't take your finger out of the wound.'

'Right.' Johansen felt light-headed, as if part of him wasn't there. Shock and blood-loss, he thought. Shock and blood-loss. Stay with it. He didn't take his finger out of the wound.

He wasn't doing a good job of walking. Grenner was doing most of it for him, and Johansen was leaning on his shoulder, an arm round his neck, moving his feet when the moment felt right.

Shock and blood-loss. Stay with it.

'Someone chucked magic at us,' he said. 'Not the Tilean. Do this logically. We burst in. We don't take him by surprise but that's our fault. I knife him, and get hit.'

'My throw breaks the window. And—'

'Someone who's watching the building realizes their assassin has been caught, and killed him before he could talk,' Johansen said.

'So the employer is or knows a spellcaster.'

'It's not much to go on.'

'Enough for Hoffmann,' Grenner said.

'Not Hoffmann,' Johansen said. A cough shook through him, and seemed to jar a thought loose in his mind. 'The Untersuchung.'

'The what?' Grenner asked.

'The Untersuchung. They're part of the Reiksguard, an undercover group like the Palisades. They find cults and conspiracies in the army and the court.'

'Witch hunters?'

'No.' Johansen could barely speak. 'Not all cults... are Chaos cults. But the Untersuchung know about magic and they track sorcerers. They're odd, very secretive... but efficient.' He felt himself slipping. Grenner paused to hoist him back onto his shoulder. They started moving again, out onto the sunlit street.

A crowd was milling outside the building, looking up at the top storey. It was on fire. The temple bells were still sounding. They seemed a very long way away. Everything did.

'Look, Karl,' said Grenner, 'I am taking you to a doctor. I am not taking you to question some bunch of nutty army agents while you're bleeding from a hole in your front.'

'You're right,' Johansen said. The bright sky swam in front of him, and his sight was full of gaps. 'You're going to visit them alone.'



ACROSS THE courtyard of the Reiksguard stables, just out of sight of the main gate, an anonymous door stood in a plain brick wall. Grenner pushed it and it swung open, unfastened, as Johansen had said it would. He thought for a second about Johansen, seeing his friend's clothes matted with blood, then stepped into the dark passage beyond.

Ten feet along was a flight of stairs, and at the top another door. He rapped on its hard wood, five knocks. There was a sound of something sliding open and a voice said, 'The sun is in the seventh house.'

'I'm a Palisades officer and this is an emergency,' Grenner said.

'That's not the password,' the voice said, 'but it'll do.' Bolts slid back and the inner door opened to reveal a long narrow room lit by slit windows and candles. Men and women in everyday clothes sat at cramped desks piled with books and documents. Shelves lined the walls. A man in his early twenties, dressed in black Sigmarite robes, stood by the door. Behind him, an older man in a leather coat looked up from his desk.

'You realise this is highly irregular, don't you?' he said. 'Any meetings between our two organisations are supposed to be approved in writing by superior officers, at least two days in advance. Some tedious quill pusher will earn a promotion by asking awkward questions if we give him a chance. So we've never met, this didn't happen, and you're not here. Agreed?'

'Agreed.'

‘Good. Let’s get to business.’ The man stood. He was in his late thirties, greying at the temples, but he still had a soldier’s build and scars. ‘Lieutenant Gottfried Braubach, and the fellow who looks like he’s in mourning is Andreas Reisefertig.’

‘Dirk Grenner.’ They shook hands.

Braubach sat down, gesturing at another chair. ‘How can we help?’

Grenner sat. ‘I and my partner were fire-balled a quarter-hour ago, trying to arrest a man who was about to shoot the Elector Count of Middenland,’ he said ‘The crossbowman was killed. I’m told you can help us identify who threw the spell.’

Braubach looked down at his desk. ‘No, sorry,’ he said.

‘What?’

‘Sorry, we can’t help you.’

Grenner stared at him. ‘Because you don’t know anything, or because you’re not going to tell me?’

Braubach sat back in his chair and steepled his fingers. ‘Look,’ he said, ‘I realise you’re in a hurry, but you should have gone through the proper channels. How do I know you are who you say you are? You could be anyone, with a thousand unhealthy reasons for asking that question. Get your superior... who is your superior?’

‘General Hoffmann.’

‘Get him to approve the exchange and we’ll talk. Until then it’s always nice to make new friends and maybe we can have a drink some evening, but right now you’re wasting your time and ours.’

Grenner took a deep breath, held it and let it out slowly. He restrained an urge to punch Braubach in the face. ‘You don’t care about a lunatic who’s tried to kill an Elector twice today?’

‘We would, except you just told us he’s dead. And why would the person who killed the assassin kill the Elector too? Actually,’ Braubach’s brow furrowed, and he leaned forward, ‘I can think of several reasons. Look, I don’t want to seem unfriendly but I can’t let you tread on our toes, and we have big toes. Andreas can help you with some neutral information about magic, but that’s all. Now, please excuse me.’

He rose, walked to the rear of the long office and disappeared through a door. Reisefertig watched him go, then turned and leaned against the desk. Grenner half-expected him to apologise, or to say something about his superior, but the man’s face was a cold mask, betraying nothing. He looked down at Grenner.

‘Let’s start with the spell,’ he said. ‘You said it was a ball of fire?’

‘Yes. I was attacked six years ago by a drunk from the College of the Bright Order so I recognise the signs.’

‘Which were?’

‘Sudden brightness before the explosion, and a slight smell of gunpowder.’

‘And the dead assassin?’

‘Burnt to a crust. Room completely destroyed.’

Reisefertig stroked his earlobe between finger and thumb. There was something in his gaze that Grenner found uncomfortable. ‘Probably not a fire ball spell then, but something like it. Fire balls are too obvious for city-use: people notice the smaller ball of fire that the wizard throws in the casting. My guess would be a blasting spell, more devastating and more subtle to cast. It only works at less than a hundred paces. Does that fit?’

‘The caster could have been in the building opposite. Or even in the street. Either would have line-of-sight.’

‘Yes. Blast requires some spell mastery, so it’s not some novice or student. But it’s general battle-magic, and quite well known. That could mean anyone. Political insurgents, foreign agents, even those Kislevite insurrectionists we hear are running around...’

‘Or an Imperial wizard who’s gone renegade?’

Reisefertig said nothing.

‘It’s an obvious possibility,’ Grenner said, ‘but you left it off the list. Let’s not play twenty questions. I’ll tell you what I think. Someone tipped off the assassin about the Elector’s route, both times. That means someone in his entourage or his household is trying to get him killed.’

‘Yes,’ said Reisefertig. He steepled his fingers, just like Braubach had. ‘An interesting scenario.’

'Can you tell me if you know of anyone in the Grand Duke's court who has links to a spellcaster?'

'No.'

'You don't know?'

'I can't tell you if we know.'

'Damn it! I'm trying to protect an Elector!' Grenner exploded, on his feet, gesticulating.

'Haven't you realised we might be doing the same thing?' Braubach said quietly from behind him. 'We have our missions and agendas too, and letting Electors die is not high among them. Please accept that we cannot give you the information you want. Go back to your general. He may have learned something while you were away.'

Grenner glared at him, but there was a look in Braubach's eyes that made him realise a retort would be pointless. He left without a word.



HOFFMANN SAT in front of the bare table in his office. He held his brow with one hand and his eyes were closed in deep thought. A wide beam of mid-afternoon sun fell through the window onto the wood floor in front of him, leaving him in shadow.

There was a knock at the door and someone said, 'Message, sir.'

'Come in.' Hoffmann stood as the messenger entered, holding out his hand for the thin strip of parchment the man carried. 'What's the news on Johansen?'

'He's conscious, sir. The physician is with him now, applying leeches.'

'Let me know as soon as they're done.' Hoffmann unrolled the parchment and moved into the sunlight to read its thin, spidery writing. He grunted with dissatisfaction.

'Any answer, sir?'

'No. No, they already know the answer,' Hoffmann said. The sunlight caught the strands of white in his dark brown hair and smoothed over some of the creases on his tired face. 'When Grenner gets back, tell him I want to see him. Immediately.'

The messenger bowed and left. Hoffmann sat back down, placed the parchment on the table and read it again. He was reading it for the fifth time when Grenner knocked and entered without waiting for a reply.

'Sir, I need to talk to you about the Untersuchung.'

'That's why I need to see you.' Grenner looked worried, and Hoffmann waved a hand at him. 'Don't fret. I'm not going to give you an arse-kicking about talking to other agencies without proper authorisation. I've been thinking.'

'So have I, sir.'

'Oh yes? Any conclusions?'

'Some, no thanks to the Untersuchung. Our mystery mage knew the assassin's location this afternoon, and was watching it. I think that Tilean connection is an attempt to implicate Duke Siegfried, the Grand Duke's brother. So we're looking for someone close to the Grand Duke, who wants him and his successor removed. And the Untersuchung were acting like they had something to hide; they clammed up the moment I mentioned Middenland.'

'Hm.' Hoffmann looked amused. 'Well. Let's go and see Johansen.' They left the office and walked down the stairs to the medical wing on the second floor.

'Thanks to you,' Hoffmann said, 'the Untersuchung now know pretty much everything we do about this business. Had it occurred to you that they might be involved?'

'Involved?' Grenner looked aghast.

'Not like that, they're not behind it. But as you suspect they have been running surveillance on members of the Grand Duke's court.'

'I thought that might be why they wouldn't give me any information.'

'Of course they wouldn't. They don't know you from Sigmar. But while you were revealing our secrets, Lieutenant Braubach sent the information you requested to me on a carrier-pigeon.' Hoffmann held up the piece of parchment. 'Along with conditions about how we can use it. Here we are.'

Johansen lay in the only occupied bed in the room. He was stripped to the waist, and pale bandages encased his ribs. His skin looked sallow and slack. He looked up at the sound of the opening door, and smiled weakly.

'No grapes?' he said.

'Only sour ones,' Grenner said.

'The Untersuchung been helpful?'

Grenner scowled.

'They've given us the name of the sorcerer,' Hoffmann said. He sat on the corner of the bed, studying the faces of his agents. 'Emilie Trautt, a former student at the Imperial College of Bright Magic. Failed to renew her oath of allegiance to the Emperor four years ago and disappeared. Resurfaced fifteen months ago with the name Sara Koch, working for Lord Udo, the Grand Duke's son, as an advisor. Some say they're lovers.'

Johansen coughed weakly. 'Oh great. The son's trying to take out his father.'

'And frame his uncle for it,' Grenner added. 'Which would make him number one in the line of succession.'

'It gets worse,' Hoffmann said. He held up the parchment. 'Sara Koch is off-limits. We can't touch her.'

'You're joking,' Grenner said disbelievingly.

'I wish I was. The Untersuchung think she can lead them to a sect of renegade wizards somewhere in Middenland. We are not to contact her, harm her, arrest her, or let her discover that she is being watched.'

'Are we sure they'll try again? They've lost their assassin.' Johansen said.

'They didn't lose the assassin, they removed him themselves. They must have a back-up plan.'

'That's not the only problem,' Johansen said. He tried to pull himself up into a sitting position, and winced. 'We still don't have anything solid against Lord Udo.'

'We don't even know if we've got the right man,' Grenner said. 'Sigmar's teeth! It's our job to defend these people, and they're busy trying to kill each other.'

'Defend them,' Hoffmann said. 'Yes. And the best form of defence is?'

'Attack,' the two agents said together.

'Exactly. We have to draw our suspects out; we have to make them prove their guilt – or innocence. And we have to do it fast: they meet with the Emperor in less than four bells.' Hoffmann got to his feet and looked down at Johansen. 'Karl, what did the physician say?'

'I'll be back on my feet in four days, fit for active duty in ten.'

'Mollycoddling nonsense. Be in uniform in fifteen minutes. You two have an appointment with Lord Udo.'



THE HALLWAY was ornate and ostentatious, decorated to impress.

Thick Araby carpets covered the oak floor. Suits of armour from different eras stood along its length, with trophies from long-past battles fixed to the wall between them: an elf general's helmet; a dwarf axe encrusted with runes; the moth-eaten head of an orc warboss, stuffed and mounted. Johansen looked at it.

'It looks as happy to be here as I am,' he whispered.

'Shut it,' said Grenner.

Johansen shut it. They'd been standing for almost five minutes and his whole chest ached like he'd been slugged by a club. The blood he had lost made him feel tired and slow. The dark serge fabric of his uniform felt coarse against his skin and tight across the shoulders, where he'd put on weight or muscle since the jacket was made. Fighting in these clothes would be hard. All in all, there were many things about this situation that made him uncomfortable.

A footman appeared and ushered them into a larger room, decorated with the same opulence but more taste. In its centre a well-built man in rich robes sat at a table, the shredded carcass of a roast cormorant before him. He was slicing a pomegranate with studied attention, the red flesh of the fruit lying in moist chunks on a silver plate. Johansen and Grenner bowed. It was ten seconds before he spoke.

'I was expecting General Hoffmann to come. Why has he not?'

Grenner cleared his throat. 'My lord, he sends apologies, but he is overseeing the security for this evening's dinner.'

Lord Udo snorted. 'As excuses go, it'll do. But I'm not impressed with your work. Very unprofessional. An assassin killed before he could be arrested, someone casting magic in the streets, and one of my father's favourite hunters is dead. Who's behind it?'

'Kislevites, sir,' said Grenner.

'Kislevites?' Lord Udo looked startled. Johansen worked hard to suppress a smile. He was glad Grenner was doing most of the talking; his own abilities as a liar weren't strong at the best of times.

'Yes, sir,' said Grenner. 'The modus operandi matches a group of Kislevite agents that we've been tracking. At least one of them was in the crowd at the north gate this morning. And everyone knows about Kislevite shamans.'

'But why would Kislev attack the Elector of Middenland? We don't even border Kislev.'

Grenner's face was blank, like a good soldier. 'Exactly, sir. They aim to destabilise the political hierarchy, not settle grudges. The Grand Duke has no links to Kislev, and that makes him an ideal target.'

'Kislevites.' Lord Udo sounded thoughtful. 'The crossbowman, you're sure he was a Kislevite? His weapons too? Crossbows aren't a regular Kislevite weapon.'

'Everything was too badly burnt to be identifiable, sir, but our Alchemics people are working on it.'

Lord Udo toyed with the glass goblet on the table. 'What are you doing to stop these... Kislevites?'

'Agents are watching their known safe-houses and equipment stores. Six of them are already in interrogation,' Grenner said. Johansen was impressed by the direct quality of the lie. 'Meanwhile we believe there may have been a leak of information from inside the Elector's household. Tomorrow morning we'll begin interrogating everyone in his employ.'

Lord Udo took a mouthful from his goblet. Johansen noted how his loose sleeve conveniently shielded his expression for a second. The noble replaced the glass carefully on the table and asked, 'How long will that take?'

'Not long, my lord,' Grenner said. 'We're very efficient about these things.'

There was a pause. Johansen and Grenner waited. Lord Udo chewed a pomegranate seed. He seemed to be thinking.

'Tonight,' he said. 'Getting to the palace. What are the arrangements?'

'A secret, my lord. Only the people who need to know actually know.'

The table flew across the floor, crashing down, the goblet shattering, fruit and silverware clattering across the carpet. Lord Udo was on his feet, one fist clenched. Johansen did not move. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Grenner hadn't either.

'How dare you say I should not know about my father's safety?' the nobleman said, spitting each word across the room. 'Tell me the plan, you insolent arse, or I'll have the Palisades closed down tomorrow. My father's life is at risk.'

So far today we've saved your father's life twice, and I've taken a crossbow bolt for my pains, Johansen thought, and you're the reason why. 'As you wish, my lord,' he said softly. 'At seven bells the Grand Duke and his household will enter five carriages in the courtyard here. They will be escorted from here to the palace by Middenland soldiers, as well as Palisades riders with crossbows and agents on the stree-'

He paused; his wound had shot a bolt of pain across his chest. Motes of black swam across his vision. Lord Udo was looking at him strangely. He took a breath, held it a second, and resumed.

'Etiquette states the Grand Duke should be in the first coach. That makes it the obvious target, so it will be empty. The Grand Duke will be in the second coach, along with his nominated successor Duke Siegfried, and the rest of the family will follow in the usual order. Each carriage will have its curtains drawn, so nobody

will be the wiser. Not even the coachmen will know which passengers they are carrying.'

Lord Udo sat back in his chair, holding his chin in his hand. The jewels on his rings gleamed in the candlelight.

'That sounds workable,' he said. 'And your secret plan, how many people know it?'

'Only the Palisades agents involved in the operation. And now you, my lord,' said Grenner.

'Who else? My father?'

'Nobody else, my lord.'

'Good,' Lord Udo said. 'That is enough. Leave me. I must get ready for the dinner.' He turned away from them. Johansen and Grenner bowed and left.

The oak front door of the townhouse closed behind them. The sun was low over the rooftops and the street outside was filled with people on their way home.

'You think he swallowed it?' Johansen asked.

'He doesn't have to digest it all,' said Grenner. 'But if he thinks we're pinning the blame on Kislew instead of Tilea then he knows his uncle isn't going to take the fall for him. He knows he's got to act tonight, and we've given him the idea of blaming it on us. Let's hope he'll bite off more than he can chew.'



THE LONG shadows of evening had darkened and melted into each other, and a few evening stars shone from the clouded sky. Below, the courtyard of the Grand Duke's townhouse was filled with carriages, horses and uniformed men. The workmen and servants had gone, leaving only a corridor of dark fabric between the house's main exit and the first of the carriages. Just inside the gate, an escort guard of Middenland soldiers waited.

Something was making Grenner's horse uncomfortable, and he leaned forward to pat its neck and adjust its blinkers. By the gate he saw Hoffmann and Johansen talking, their horses still. Even in the grey

light he could see Johansen's face was pale and pained. Duty like this, even on horseback, was no place for an injured man.

He rode up to the two of them and saluted. The gesture felt odd, but this was a formal occasion and all protocol had to be observed. Hoffmann was in full uniform, his campaign medals spread proudly across it.

'Grenner. Good,' he said. 'How are the preparations?'

'Done, sir. The coachmen and servants are briefed, the family are waiting inside the house. Nobody will know who's riding in which carriage, not even the people inside them.'

'Nobody except us.' Hoffmann smiled slightly. 'Seven bells is about to sound. Give the signal.'

'Yes, sir.' He paused. 'We're putting an Elector's life at risk, sir.'

'I know. But better we draw our man out now than let him try to slit the Elector's throat in his bed tonight. Give the command.'

Grenner turned his horse and rode to the first carriage, the painted carvings on their ornate woodwork dull in the torchlight. He nodded to the driver, dismounted and walked through the cloth-walled passageway to the house door. He knocked twice and it swung open.

They were all there, standing in the anteroom beyond, glistening with silks, gold and jewels. The Grand Duke and his wife, Baron Siegfried and his wife and son, Lord Udo, Lord Sigismund and Lady Anna, Lord Helmut and Lady Margaret, with their attendants and servants. He snapped to attention.

'Your Grace, my lords and ladies, the carriages are ready,' he said.

None of them looked at him. None of them acknowledged he was there. As Grenner turned smartly and walked back out to the courtyard he asked himself, not for the first time, why he cared.



THE CARRIAGES were loaded, their passengers concealed behind thick velvet curtains. The Middenland guards began to move forward, out into the street that led north to the Imperial palace. Grenner waited at the gate, signalling to each of the coach-drivers when it was their turn to move into position in the line. One started too early, following the one next to it, but he waved it back in time. If they lost the right order, they lost everything.

Outside, a thin crowd lined the route to the palace, held back by bored members of the City Watch. Grenner found himself riding alongside the second carriage and deliberately slowed his horse, dropping back until he was next to Johansen.

'Are you all right?' he asked.

'I feel like hell. I shouldn't be here. I'll be useless if anything kicks off. And I wish it would – better than hanging around at the palace until these fat mosquitoes are ready to come home.'

'If something happens you can bet Hoffmann will have us making reports and interviewing witnesses till three bells tomorrow,' Grenner said.

'The old man's taking a hellish risk.'

'I know. If this goes wrong it's the end of the department. They'll hang Hoffmann. I'm worried that we've based all this on the word of the Untersuchung. Is their information good? Do you trust them?'

Johansen didn't reply. Then he groaned.

'I'm getting too old for this,' he said. 'Time to find a nice young widow who owns a pub, some tall strong blonde who's not too old, settle down...'

Grenner snorted. 'You're not thinking of that northern girl who owns the Black Goat? You wouldn't get an easy life with her. She'd keep you—'

Ahead of them, the second carriage exploded in a burst of white light and a wave of heat. Its body lifted three feet off the ground and hung for a second at the centre of a fierce bright world, until the shockwave slammed it down into the ground. A crashing roar blew past them, echoing off the buildings. Wood and metal whizzed through the air, ploughing into the walls and the crowd.

Grenner reined in his horse, turning its head away from the blast so it wouldn't be panicked. People were screaming and running around him, falling, blocking the street. The other carriages were trying to turn, to get away from the scene. He saw someone fall under the wheels, crushed. Horses were screeching and rearing. The wreckage blazed. Where debris landed, new fires were starting. People were burning, flailing as they died.

'Think fast!' Johansen yelled.

'They always attack from above!' Grenner shouted back. He stared up, looking for a figure silhouetted at a window or against the dark sky, but the afterimages of the explosion were blinding him. He heard the thunk of Johansen firing his crossbow, glanced to see where it was pointed, followed the line, and caught a movement on the roof.

He dropped the reins, stood on the saddle and leaped for the front of the nearest building, grabbing its exposed corner-beam with both hands and climbing, hand over hand, grabbing ledges and windows, pulling himself up the wall. He'd done this enough times in the Watch, chasing thieves and cat-burglars, but never in full uniform. He could feel the heat of the fires on his back through the thick fabric.

Three storeys up he heaved himself over the eaves and looked round. The weird landscape of chimneys and tiled slopes was filled with dark shadows. Would the wizard have run, or be lying in ambush?

Grenner moved forward silently, trying to block out the sounds of panic and pain below, straining to hear anything ahead. There was a scraping of stone; a tile slipping, he guessed. He moved towards it, keeping low, climbing the inclines of the roofs. Then something exploded at his feet and he jumped back with an shout of shock. A roost of pigeons scrambled into the sky in front of him on noisy wings.

Something moved. His quarry knew he was there. Running footsteps headed south, towards the city's south gate. He followed, using chimney-stacks for cover at the top of each roof, keeping to places where faint starlight let him see his footing.

There: a fleeing silhouette, robed, moving across the rooftops, not looking back. It was only thirty paces away. Grenner drew his dagger from its shoulder-sheath and moved ahead. They were getting close to the city wall; soon the wizard would have nowhere to run. Keeping the figure in view, he crouched as low as he could and moved forward.

The robed figure reached the edge of the last house. Ahead, across a wide street, was the Altdorf city wall, bright with torchlight from its watch-towers. The wizard stopped and looked back, and Grenner saw her face for the first time. She was younger than he'd expected. A strong face, handsome, not beautiful. Long, dark hair in a braid. She looked frightened.

Grenner stood, his knife in his hand, ready to throw. For a moment neither of them moved or spoke. Then she lifted her hands, almost as if in supplication. She was saying something, but he couldn't make out the words. He moved toward her slowly.

She was casting a spell.

Grenner threw himself back, behind a chimney stack, away from the blast. When, after a second it had not come, he looked up. Her arms were spread like a bird and as he watched she lifted a foot into the air.

Grenner thought for an instant about the exploding carriage, the stampeding horse, Lord Udo, the Untersuchung, Johansen burnt and bleeding, and he flung his knife. It flashed through the air, missed her, struck the stone wall and fell. The wizard hung in the night for a second, then soared across the street and up, over the wall, out into the darkness beyond the city.

He walked to the edge of the roof and began to climb down, slowly, like a man who is thinking of other things.



JOHANSEN AND Hoffmann were waiting on their horses on the street below.

'You threw a knife at her,' Hoffmann said.

'I aimed to miss,' Grenner said. It was a lie.

'The Untersuchung will be happy she got away.'

There was a pause.

'The authorities are going to need a good explanation,' said Johansen.

'Leave that to me. When the Grand Duke hears that Lord Udo was the only person who had been told he would be in the carriage that was targeted, he should understand.'

'The Grand Duke's safe?' Grenner asked.

'Yes, and his brother. They were in the last carriage, as we planned.'

'How's he going to take the news that his son was in the carriage that exploded?'

'A tragic error by the coachman,' said Hoffmann. 'Lord Udo will have a grand funeral, and there will be no trial for treason and attempted patricide to embarrass the von Bildhofen family. The wizard will not be mentioned. The Grand Duke knows how these things work.'

'What happens to the coachman?'

'He died in the explosion, of course.'

There was another pause. Grenner swung himself up into the saddle. 'It's been a long day,' he said, 'and I need a drink.'

'Have it at the Palisades. Johansen needs rest. And I've got a nice quiet job for the two of you tomorrow.'

'What is it?'

'Finding those Kislevites and making people believe they were behind this.'

Grenner groaned. 'More bloody donkey work.'

'No rest for the wicked,' said Johansen.

Hoffmann smiled. 'Except Lord Udo.'

Grenner was silent for a moment, thinking. 'With your permission, sir,' he said. 'I'd prefer to drink alone this evening.'

'Very well.' They rode north, back towards the Palisades. Grenner watched them go, noticing that their route would take them past the burning carriage. Then he turned and walked towards the river, and a quiet tavern he knew where he could be alone with a bottle of Estalian wine and his thoughts. ✕

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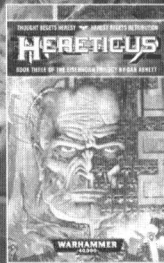
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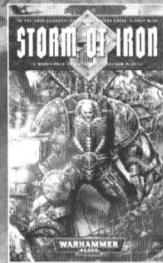
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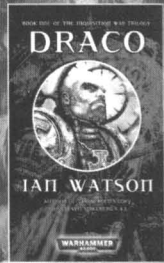
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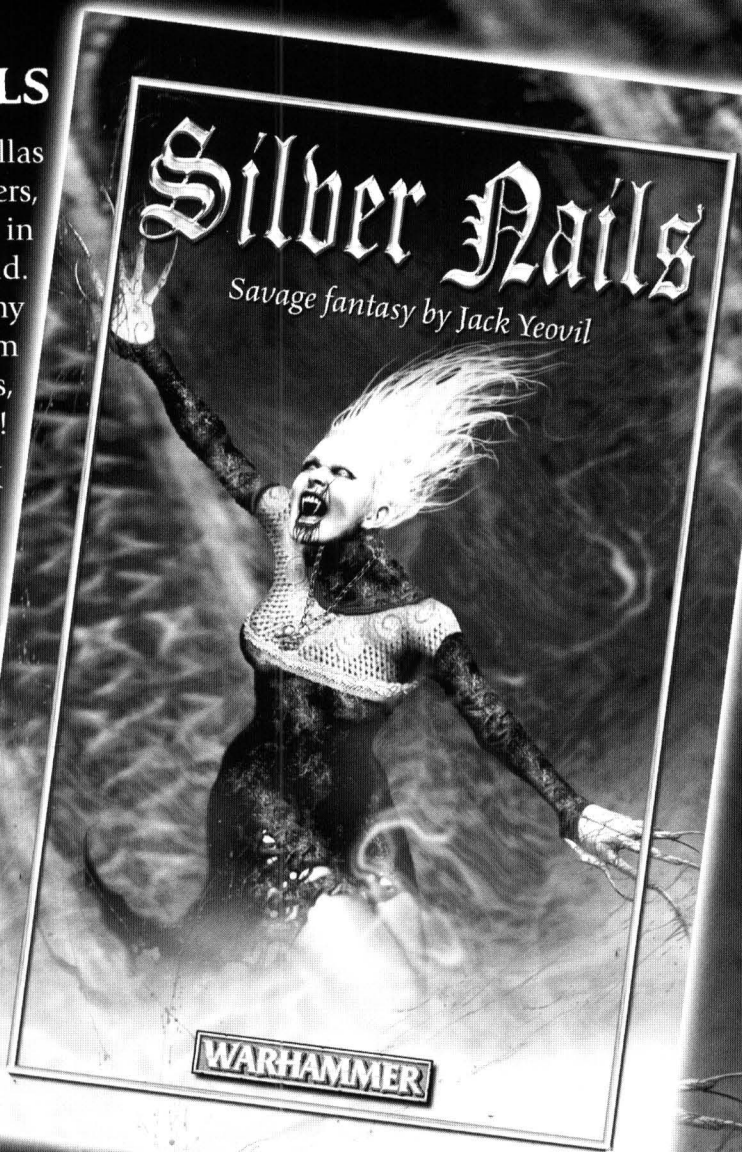
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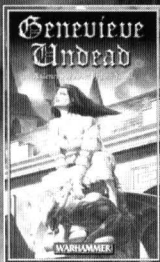
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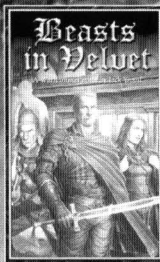
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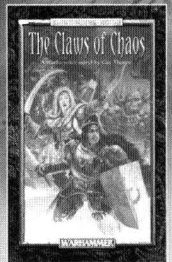
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It was there, in the back of his mind: a tingling, like an inaccessible itch. Not a voice. Something softer, more insidious, something that made it impossible to turn away. Villon felt as if he had gone without water for days and the words that fell from Kraus's lips were droplets from a mountain spring. A quick shake of the head cleared his mind long enough for him to take in the rapt expressions of those around him.

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- **PAYBACK** by Graham McNeill

Trask grabbed for a pistol beside the bed, but Cornelius was ready for him and batted it from his hands, sending it crashing through the window. As the window shattered, he saw upturned faces and a group of armed men making their way through the crowds of people towards the brothel. He recognised Constantine at the centre of the group and cursed as he realised he'd been set up.

- **REST FOR THE WICKED** by James Wallis

The assassin tried to duck. The piece of wood glanced off his head and smashed through the window-pane. Broken glass cascaded out into the street. It didn't seem to bother him. He moved across the room but the crossbow didn't waver. Grenner watched as his hand tightened on the trigger.

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